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VENUS VICTRIX

A Study of a Woman

BY

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"T'OTHER DEAR CHARMER," "HEDRI," "WROSTELLA'S WEIRD," ETC.

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VENUS VICTRIX.

CHAPTER I.

THE post-mortem was over.

They had drawn the linen up to the royally beautiful face upon which was stamped a look of triumph that rose above the mortal agony of her passing, as though in the very act of her defeat by death she had wrested to herself a higher victory that had made the pale King's of no effect; a thing null and void.

They seemed unable to take their eyes from her, these grave doctors whose cruel work was just done, and I knew that her witchery was as potent, and her power of drawing them as great, as when, in all the pomp of her laughing, goddess-like loveliness, she had drawn men after her as honey draws flies, so that Venus Victrix, as she had been in life, in death she was Venus Victrix still. Even old Dr. Du Pre,

who surely knew her well enough, was under the charm, and he sighed impatiently as he turned away, fixing upon me a glance that spoke sternest inquiry and disgust, then followed by the others, who looked at me with equally hostile eyes, he passed into an adjoining room, and I was alone.

Alone with my accuser—alone with the silence that was a more puissant accusation against me, than if the whole world had shouted itself hoarse in denunciation of my crime, and I was young, strong, with hot life tingling in my veins, ay, and for which I would fight to the very last, though her dead hand strove to clutch me down into the nothingness in which she herself lay.

What if she had broken my life once—did I not set my teeth hard, battle with my despair, overcome my disgust for “the trivial round, the common task” that no love could ever now illumine, and out of the poor shreds of such an existence as she had left me, build up a useful career that was at least sweetened by the self-respect that is the reward of all strenuous honorable endeavor?

An accident, which is but another name for Fate, had sent me, out of all the women in the world, to be the sole nurse and attendant of this woman, who

had stolen my lover from me, yet knew me not ; it had been from my hand alone that she had eaten and drunk, my hand that had tended her, as, in all the stony immobility of paralysis, she lay before me, but with brain action clear, subtle, ay, and of such virile strength that she had been able to carry out unaided a scheme in which she counted the sacrifice of her life as nothing, so she might keep us two forever sundered.

She was dead—and pity for her in my heart there was none. For most dead people we can be sorry, death has passed a sponge over their misdeeds, and all is forgotten. But here, the evil had not died with the dead ; like the writer of a corrupt book, it lived after her, and its consequences would go on forever and ever.

And what had I done that she should so have cursed me ? I, who had found it even in my heart to forgive her, who through the best, the divinest instincts of my nature had been betrayed into a position which alone could have given her the power to wreak such a fiendish vengeance upon me ?

Ignorantly I had come into the house of the self-tortured, God-stricken woman, and of my own free will, and through pity for him and for her I had re-

mained, and for this error of judgment, or triumph over self—which you will—I was now about to receive my wage, and it was *her* hand that thrust it, overflowing, plenteously, into mine. I drew near her and looked and looked at her as she lay on the bare table, her grave-clothes disposed about her like royal robes, for neither death nor that death in life in which alone I had known her, seemed to have power to take the seal of sovereignty from her, and a sudden sense of my own insignificance seized me.

What was I that I should dare to cross the threshold of that kingdom of love out of which she had thrust me? She had been his wife, and he must have loved her after a man's fashion, and what woman could dare to stand up beside her? As if for answer I glanced round the great room that might have been decked for its present occasion, so white it was, pure white everywhere that it did not gleam mother o' pearl.

The bed glistened like an iridescent shell under its canopy of white brocade, upon the frothed up snow of the cambric and lace below which she had lain in all the pomp of her young, fresh beauty, and later in the stony semblance of death, the very flower lustres in the room were white, and nowhere was

harsher coloring to be found than in the shell tints of the furniture, and perhaps the rich heap of opal rings lying on the table—the only jewels she ever suffered to break the whiteness with which she had loved at all times to surround herself.

The mirror, framed in and flanked and surrounded by all the silver paraphernalia of the toilet of Venus, reflected, besides the silent figure on the table, a small slight shape at which I glanced inquiringly, asking why it exhibited none of the signs of fear and horror natural enough, surely, to the occasion?

I moved a step nearer and the steady eyes in the glass met mine with imperturbable calm. The mouth was firm even to hardness, and if the colorless cheeks and dark circles under the eyes affirmed me but mortal, the spirit within overrode the weakness of the flesh and bid defiance to the fate that was rushing on me.

“Heaven,” I said aloud, “what have I done that you thus pursue me? From my youth up I have struggled to follow the good, resist the evil, and the few prizes for which I fought have been won by hard work, with neither friends nor luck to help me. You struck me to earth, I rose again, first to

my hands, then to my knees, at last to my feet, saw my independence, and now you strike me once again, and threaten to deprive me of—life. You yourself inspired in my heart the divine quality of pity, of forgiveness, that kept me here when wisdom bid me depart, and to your merciful promptings alone is due the position in which I find myself to-day. And though you repented now, and sent down an angel to my relief, he could not save me.”

A door opened sharply behind me, and this dead woman’s husband came in, crossing swiftly over to me.

“Do you know what they are saying?” he said. “That you killed her—*you!*”

He shook my shoulder in the vehemence of his passion, then, as I answered nothing, his face changed, and he bent down to look with keen scrutiny in my eyes.

“The old spirit,” he muttered. “But your hand”—he took and chafed it between his two strong ones—“is cold.” I drew it away and locked it in its fellow behind my back.

“They only say what the whole world will say,” I replied, “what you yourself would say if you were not—prejudiced.”

“Say that I did it myself,” he said roughly, “or at any rate we two together, not you alone.”

“No,” I said, “you did not do it. We were locked in here together—two women—and one of us—died.”

“While you were asleep,” he said, doggedly; “that is what I have been telling those fools in there — somebody got in — hasn’t she enemies enough? and in the dark she probably thought it was you, giving her medicine, and the thing was done in a moment.”

“But it was not dark,” I said; “a night-light was burning. And how could anyone get in with locked doors?”

“Hid themselves probably before you locked them,” he said impatiently.

“Then how get out without unlocking them?” I said. “No, no! You came to fetch me!” I added, moving towards the door.

“Yes.”

In turning we had both come face to face with *her*, and a spasm of ungovernable hatred convulsed his dark, strong face.

“You think you have separated us—but you have not; you shall not,” he said, addressing her, loudly,

defiantly, so that he might easily be heard in the next room.

“Are you mad?” I cried in a vehement underbreath; “won’t you leave me at least a chance for my life? You make me despise you; a man should have self-control, and you have none. Each word you speak in my self-defence but damns me the more. Your vehemence supplies the one needful motive for a crime at first sight incomprehensible; and from such a partisan may God deliver me.”

“Nurse Gray,” called Dr. Du Pre’s stern voice from the threshold.

I went on the instant, and Hardress Norton strode step for step with me. I felt that I could have killed him as he stood shoulder to shoulder with me before my accusers. I met only harsh avenging glances as I looked from one to another, then Dr. Du Pre said:

“You are aware that Mrs. Norton died from the administration, accidental or otherwise, of prussic acid last night?”

“Yes.”

“You do not know how such poison came to be administered?”

“No.”

“You are sure that you did not give it in mistake for a sleeping draught?”

“Sure.”

“The door was locked when you discovered her death early this morning?”

“It was.”

“No one could possibly have had access to the room during the night?”

“No one.”

“She appeared in her usual condition when you retired to rest last night?”

“No. She was usually asleep when I go to bed, last night she was awake. She refused to have her sleeping draught, and said she would call me in the night when she required it.”

One of the doctors whispered something to Dr. Du Pre, who then said:

“Is it possible that anyone was hidden in the room without your knowledge?”

“No.”

“There is no wardrobe—no screen?”

“The wardrobe was locked. The highest screen in the room is not over four feet.”

“Did you look behind them when you went to bed?” said Dr. Du Pre, quickly.

“No.”

One of the men, stern and hard-featured, looked at me with a slight unbending of his brows, and a little more as if I were a human being, and not some noxious beast.

“A kneeling person would be quite hidden,” he said. “Could anyone have got into the room that night without your knowledge?”

I considered.

“It is possible, but most unlikely,” I said. “Lydia had already brought up the things for the night——”

“Who is Lydia?”

“A housemaid. The only other person save Mr. Norton and myself who was ever suffered to enter the room.”

Dr. Du Pre shook his head, scouting the idea of Lydia’s instrumentality in the affair.

“A fool and an automaton,” he said, “without the brain to conceive or the nerve to commit such a crime. And I am sorry to say, that besides the presumptive evidence against you, Nurse Gray, I am in possession of something far stronger, which I will come to presently.”

Hardress laughed.

It was at me and not at him that Dr. Du Pre looked when he again spoke.

“When I was summoned hastily this morning to Mrs. Norton, I found her dead, as I had expected, but the cause of death, instead of being a second paralytic stroke was—poison, and in examining her I found between her nightdress and the pillow—this.”

He took from his waistcoat pocket a small phial, at sight of which I started violently, for I had last seen it in my writing-case, where I had locked it safely away with—other things.

I passed my hand across my brow, thinking that in truth I had gone mad at last.

“You have seen this before?”

“Yes.”

“It belonged to you?”

“It did.”

Was it my voice that spoke? Was it Hardress’s hand that prevented my slipping like water to the ground?

“I refused a certificate,” resumed Dr. Du Pre, heavily, “and ordered a post-mortem. Gentlemen, you know with what results. To-morrow a coroner’s inquest will be held, and the three persons who

had access to Mrs. Norton's room will be cross-examined. Until then," he looked at the man who stood beside me with an expression of strongest reprobation, "it will be your duty, sir, to guard against the possible escape of Nurse Gray."

"She shan't escape."

The stubborn voice, the hand that gripped my shoulder, might have been that of a jailer indeed—but more than the harshest execution of justice did I fear Hardress Norton then.

"It will be desirable," said Dr. Du Pre, with ever-increasing harshness of look and voice, "that Nurse Gray shall have no opportunity leaving these rooms to-day."

"She shall not," said Hardress; then, straightening himself up, "neither will I."

Dr. Du Pre's eyes flashed.

"I will make it my business that she has no such chance," he said. "Since you, sir, whose duty it is to avenge the inhuman murder of your helpless wife, display the most extravagant affection for her presumptive murderess, it is for others to take the necessary steps for preventing the defeat of justice."

"Do," said Hardress, calmly; "give her in charge, and do your best to hang her for the final extinction

of a three parts dead body, a body that once had power to destroy two lives—this woman's and mine—and commit the most hideous *sou* murder ever known."

"So you admit in so many words," said Dr. Du Pre, "that there have been passages of love between you and this woman who stole to your wife's bedside under the guise of a nurse, and your whole attitude blazes out the fact that you love this woman still, and that you rejoice over the removal of your wife as the obstacle to your plans?"

"Enough," broke in Hardress, sternly; "you talk as a fool of things of which you know nothing. And you are not a magistrate, I believe, and as such empowered to put us on our defence. You have done your duty, now go."

As Dr. Du Pre turned silently away, followed by his coadjutors, I could not bear the whole weight of condemnation his whole figure conveyed, and I sprang forward, intercepting him at the door.

"Sir," I said, "you know, I suppose, only the worst of me. Before God, I am not the thing that you suppose."

He put me by without a word or a glance, and passed out. I stood gazing at the shut door, then

turned and looked at the square-shouldered outlines which stood out sharply against the light, dominating everything.

"I am not a hypocrite," he said, "or a liar. Do you expect me to say that I am sorry? Sorry! Does the freed galley-slave curse his liberty? And I am free, Lyndsay, *free!*"

"Yes," I said with intense bitterness, "and I am practically a prisoner. What you are pleased to call your love has made a rope with which to hang me. Not even the evidence of the bottle that held the poison is as damning as your attitude towards me but who took that bottle from my desk? It was locked up with—with——" and swift as the thought that struck me, I ran out of the room.

Through the gloom that was fast blotting out the whiteness of the dead woman's chamber, I made my way to the little clothes cabinet that I had called mine, and easily found the desk that I had left locked, but which now opened readily enough to my hand. It was empty—the packet of letters from Hardress Norton that I had rashly kept through so many years was gone.

I stood still, scarcely breathing, as I realized in its entirety the ghastly plot that had been conceived

to ruin me, and which *she* had deliberately forfeited her life to carry out. But who had been her instrument? Though her brain might devise, her hand was powerless to carry out the scheme, and save Lydia, the dull almost half-witted woman who held her in obvious terror, there was no one who could possibly be fashioned into her tool.

"Lyndsay," cried Hardress's voice from the threshold, and I went slowly back and stood before him.

"The letters are gone," I said, with stony calm, "the letters you wrote me five years ago, that I kept, like the madwoman I was, and brought here."

"Then you *did* love me all the while?" he cried, passionately, triumphantly, and I half turned my head to where that white thing glimmered coldly in the dusk, as if it, too, must hear him.

"What is that to you?" I cried, fiercely. "Go away and leave me. If you are a man leave me."

"I *will* leave you," he said, coming close up to me, and peering down on me through the dusk, "my poor little girl, but I will come back, and I will bring food that you must, *shall* eat."

"Go then," I said, so gently that he thought me broken down at last and compliant, and he went.

Then I sprang to the door, and as I drew the bolt across it, felt the key turn in the lock on the other side.

But I knew that Hardress's hand had not turned it.

CHAPTER II.

“When ye’re done and finished your wark,
(Blaw, blaw, blaw winds, blaw)
Come back to me and ye’ll get your sark
(And the wind has blawn my plaid awa’.”)

I WENT to the window and looked out.

In the Park beyond, in Prince’s Gate below, the lamps were lit, and between them the cheerful traffic of life went to and fro, soothing me with its murmur, as any sounds of human life will a solitary suffering soul.

Seldom indeed had I found time during my three months’ residence in the house, to stand here and watch the work-a-day world on this side of the Park gates, the summer-day life on the other, for body and soul had been absorbed in the fierce demands made upon them by the tyrant to whom I had been summoned in so violent a hurry that I did not even know the name of my charge when Dr. Du Pre brought me to her side.

“I want a nurse who is a miracle,” he said grimly

to the matron of the hospital, when he rushed in; "as immovable as a rock, complaisant as a fool, with the patience of Job, and the constitution of a horse. Have you any such person?"

"What is the case?" said the matron, dubiously, then turned to look questioningly at me, as I stood (having just come in) behind her.

"Total paralysis of limbs. Head as clear as yours or mine—or clearer. Young. Beautiful. Very rich. Fiendish temper. Wears out every soul who goes near her. Nurses won't stop—servants afraid to approach her—husband at wit's end. He's with her now. Will pay anything to get someone who will stay."

The matron looked at me again.

"What about night-work," she said.

"There's none. She sleeps well—under opiates. There's a maid to do everything that's required. Now then can you supply me?"

"Let me go," I whispered in the matron's ear. My life had been too easy of late, I wanted the discipline of some tough, disagreeable work, such work, as scourges out thought and leaves only a longing for rest.

"Very well," she said, "if it is too hard you can

always come back," and in less than ten minutes I was driving rapidly to my destination in Dr. Du Pre's carriage.

It was a June afternoon, and the contrast between the errand upon which I was going and the pride of life that rioted beneath the trees in the Park, smote on me forcibly as we passed through.

"Oh! it must be hard to drop out of it all, out of the movement, the mere joy of living, to be confined, as it were, in one's own body, crying aloud perchance to God that he would relieve you from it."

"Is he good to her?" I said, thinking aloud.

Dr. Du Pre turned and looked at me very oddly.

"If *you* are good to her," he said, "look on your shoulders every day for wings. I can't say I ever saw any on his. But he does his duty. Here we are."

He sprang out and I followed him into the house, and up the stairs. He opened a door, motioned me to remain outside while he went in, and shut it sharply behind him, but not before a woman's voice, a voice with the true virago note in it, gave a slight foretaste of what lay before me.

He came back almost immediately, and as I en-

tered, a man's figure passed quickly out at a distant door, and I could have found it in my heart to smile, in such a hurry was he, and so delighted to be off-duty, after the manner of selfish man.

And so eager was I to see this woman that I scarcely noted the strange beauty of the room and the very wantonness of wealth around me, never pausing till I was face to face with her—and then it was but for a moment I saw her, for the thick darkness of a winter's night closed around me.

“Faint?” I heard a voice say from a great distance, and felt a hand on my wrist, which I thrust violently from me, then ran, tripping over the furniture, towards the door.

Dr. Du Pre caught me outside the threshold, and looking stern and angry, said:

“How's this? Don't you obey matron's orders? And you've seen worse sights than this before. Here you are, and here for the present you'll stop.”

He took me by the shoulders, pushed me into the room, and locked the door on me.

As I stood there, trembling with amazement, fear, pain, and a very fury of jealousy that shook me like a leaf, a voice from the distant bed called out imperiously:

“Come here !”

In the silence that ensued I found myself examining and appraising with curious exactitude the surroundings of the woman who was calling me. Of whatever sins you might accuse her, or perhaps by reason of those very sins, lack of taste was the last fault of which she would be found guilty.

Her voice was as the voice of one who said, “I call unto one and he cometh,” and to another “Go and he goeth,” and I could have laughed aloud at the thought of how I was summoned as servant in the house of which I should have been mistress, and by the very woman who had usurped my place. Then shame seized me, for with all its fury it was a helpless voice calling from a helpless body, powerless to enforce obedience from me or any other, and a sudden revulsion of pity shook me from head to foot.

Might I not forgive her now that God had taken her punishment into his hand? This was not the woman I had passionately envied, hated, been curious about; but a broken creature who had no friends, though she had never in all the pride of her godless triumph stood in such need of them.

If this woman had hurt me greatly, God had hurt

her more, punished her more than she had ever punished me, and my wrongs faded away in the contemplation of this awful ruin of fleshly pride and ambition.

I could not see her from where I stood, as far as possible away from her in the vast room, for the foot of the shell-like bed hid her, but as I drew near I saw the long length of rigid limb upon which the satin quilt lay stiff as grave clothes. I thought of the Egyptian mummy at the feast, and trembled.

“Why don’t you come when I call you?” she said furiously. “What else are you here for, I wonder? Give me some of that Burgundy and don’t spill it, as those other fools generally do.”

When I had given her the wine, she lay rolling her head restlessly to and fro on the pillow, and looking from time to time at me.

“Can you dress hair well?” she said, abruptly.

“I dress my own,” I replied.

“And very badly you do it too,” she said, rudely; “but then it’s of very different quality to mine. I hate dark hair—it always looks dirty to me. You had better take off your bonnet, and then you can dress me.”

“Dress you?”

“Don’t stand staring like an idiot? I mean my head of course. Oh! here you are! (to someone who had entered by a door behind me). Would you believe that if Dr. Du Pre had not locked this woman in, she would have run away? A pack of cowards they all are, running away from a helpless woman.”

The mordant voice—a voice that seemed to stop and stay every human impulse to her as it arose—pursued me as I moved away, trembling, and with an upleaping prayer that I might be so altered *he* would not recognize me.

“You must be kinder to them, Sabine,” he said in a low tone, the tone of a man tried beyond his strength, and having reached almost the snapping point of endurance, and without even the echo of love in it.

She murmured something, I could not tell what, and, startled, I turned to see if that summer sweet voice was hers, and saw that she was covering every inch of his face with soft, quick, passionate kisses, crooning over him the while, like a mother over her child.

A deadly sickness took hold of me, then jealousy fiercely stabbed me through and through as with

a knife. Whatever she was, he was *hers*, and she loved him. Not because he was rich and in every way desirable had she stolen him from me, but simply and purely *for love*.

I stood looking at one of the pictures on the wall, seeing nothing, only stupidly asking myself how, if I let my self-control go thus early in the day, I proposed to carry this business out to the end? It was almost impossible that he should not recognize me. Instinctively I drew down the veil over my hospital bonnet, and at the same moment he called me, and I went at once and stood before him. His weary eyes met mine without a spark of recognition in them. Had I indeed altered so much in the past five years, or was my dress so complete a disguise to me as an entirely new body?

And if I had altered, so had he. The face and limbs were the presentment of Hardress Norton, but the soul that gave them life and individuality was gone.

“Nurse,” he said kindly, and then I saw that he held a telegram, “I have just been summoned to my mother, who will not, I fear, live very long. I leave Mrs. Norton in your care and hope——”

“She is an old woman,” struck in Mrs. Norton,

violently. "One expects old people to die; and what good can you do by going? She'll die fast enough without you."

A shade of disgust—no more—crossed his weary face; he was evidently used to her.

"I will do my best," I said, only desiring that he might do as he wished, and resolving that I would go away on his return.

He started violently at first sound of my voice, and now looked at me eagerly, intently, then with keen disappointment, for I had hardened my heart, and it was only an expressionless mask that gave back his glance through the veil.

"Thank you," he said, with all his old charm of manner, drawing a deep breath of relief. I moved away out of the reach of the scolding, entreating, passionate voice that implored him not to leave her even for an hour.

Before he went away he called me again, and I went.

I was not a woman, an identity even, I was only "Nurse"; something in a cap and gown to serve real people, without a name, without a past or future, without temper, or heart, or taste, simply an automaton, before whom family skeletons walked at their ease.

“ This will be my address,” he said, and wrote it down. “ Will you send me a telegram twice each day telling me how my wife is ? ”

My wife ! The words cut into me like a lash.

“ The first one will be to say that I am *dead* ! ” cried Mrs. Norton, tears rolling heavily down her cheeks, “ and then perhaps you will be sorry ! ”

He shook his head slightly, as if at the absurdity of her words, then as he tore the sheet out of his note-book, our eyes met.

Ay, we had been lovers once, and our faces had been full of love and hope and faith, when last we had looked on one another, and now we were both changed and pale, as if love and we had never met and clasped hands, and I could only think of him now as a comrade in sore need of my help.

“ I will do my best,” I said.

CHAPTER III.

“ I’ve lost my hopes, I’ve lost my joy,
I’ve lost the key, but not the lock ;
I durst hae ridden the world around
Had Christie Graeme been at my back.”

So far, I had recalled the circumstances under which I first came to this house, in spite of an irritating knocking at the door that never ceased, but now as the summons grew more urgent, I became angry, and stamped my foot, feeling that I despised a man who so completely allowed love to master self-restraint.

“ Lyndsay ! Lyndsay ! ”

The cry, imperative, masterful, seemed to sweep through and fill the room, but it only angered me the more ; and I crossed over and with my lips close to the wood said,

“ What do you want ? ”

“ I have brought you food.”

“ Then put it down and go away.”

“ But I must see you.”

“ You can’t. If you attempt to enter this room to-

night I shall go into *hers*. Your conduct is unseemly, contemptible."

"But you must eat."

"Put down the food, then, and go. Who gave you leave to unlock the door?"

"The house is mine. I am the master of it."

"I suppose I shall not be arrested until after the coroner's inquest?"

"No. And not then if I'm alive to prevent it. Will you open the door?"

"Yes. If you give me your word of honor not to try and come in."

"But I must see you. We have to think of what is to be done."

"There is nothing to be done. And you cut the ground from underneath my feet by your folly."

"But I've got an idea. Lydia——"

"Keep it till to-morrow. If you don't give me that promise, I won't take in the food at all."

A pause, then :

"I promise," came in a grudging voice, and I drew back the bolt. The door flew open and a bright light rushed in. Hardress was holding out a tray towards me.

I trembled under its weight as I took it, and

hastily turning about, set it on the floor, then I shut the door upon him.

“If you want me in the night, call; I shall be outside,” he said, as I drew the bolt, then the key turned on the other side.

I turned grimly to the considerations of those essentials of life that might surely be dispensed with in the case of a life that is practically forfeit to the law. Why should I eat? To gather in more strength with which to suffer, to make stronger in me the loss of mere existence? And yet I broke bread and drank, and presently something that was not me, sang loudly in my heart, sang with a triumphant gladness that seemed to me brutal and inhuman, the pæan which the living soul sings over our dead, even though our ears shudder as they hearken, and for shame's sake would deny it.

With that passion of joy in mere life throbbing in my veins I went back to my place by the window, and cried aloud that I would fight for it, for this my birthright, to the last; that in spite of circumstantial evidence, in spite of motive, in spite of Hardress's fatal imprudence, and of everything that could be urged against me, I would stand up and defend myself to the very end.

Through the best, the purest instincts of pity had I been betrayed, and even now I could not regret them, could not be sorry that I had worked as yoke-fellow with Hardress in the awful slavery from which for him there was no escape. If my love had ever been worth anything, then was the time to prove it—and I did.

I took upon my shoulders the daily, hourly torment that had been his ; I made myself so necessary to his tyrant that he became practically a free man, and gradually the color came back to his cheek, the light to his eye, and he was no longer a suffering machine, but a potential being, able to take his part in the world's drama, ay, and enjoy it.

After that first day in which he had looked at without recognizing me, he never seemed to look at me again. He went away, he returned ; but when he spoke to me, it was to an abstraction—to something in a white cap, and apron—but to me as Lyndsay Gray—never.

He must have known the hell his wife made those four walls for me, and sometimes, God forgive me ! I said to myself bitterly that a man's selfishness was deeper than the sea, and higher than heaven itself, inasmuch as he never once thanked me by look or word.

But when *it* came—when I wakened one chilly morning to find my martyrdom over and my oppressor dead—when the terrified household hurrying madly on each other's heels at my summons, brought him also, it was not to the dead, but to me he turned as I stood apart, and stooping down to look in my eyes said :

“Lyndsay—poor little woman—Lyndsay!”

CHAPTER IV.

“Since in the toils of fate thou art enclosed
Submit, if thou canst brook submission.”

I PAUSE in a retrospection that is one of course, leaping hither and thither, without regard to the due sequence of events, and return to the moment when Hardress Norton had departed to his sick mother, leaving me in sole charge of his wife.

He had dried the tears which had gushed so plentifully for him, dried them quietly, calmly, as if it were a part of his day's work, and after he had gone, as they continued to roll down, I dried them again, with a grim sense of the irony of the whole situation.

Presently she stopped crying, and looked at me when I finally ceased to apply the cambric to her cheeks.

“Powder-puff,” she said laconically.

It was close beside her, as a good woman, anxious for her soul, might keep her Bible.

“Hand-glass,” she said in the same tone, when I

had carefully distributed the scented powder over the delicate face in which the carnations still lingered, and which must have been so entrancingly lovely when she lived and moved like other mortals, and had her being.

Are we not all slaves to the eye? But methinks it is color that gives us our greatest joy. I held the mirror so that she might see her head and the web of Mechlin lace that fell between it and the swathed outline on the bed.

She looked at herself eagerly, questioningly, and I knew that the show was not all pure vanity, for that she wished to know how she had looked to Hardress as he went.

"Take it away," she said presently; then added, with a sort of grudging praise:

"You're not such a fool as the last woman. She screamed at the sight of a powder-puff, and didn't know a single trick by which a man's slippery love is caught and kept. She preached submission. Submission! Do I look like it? She pointed out how much I had to be thankful for—what treasures still remained, ha! ha! How happy I ought to be to have a husband to sit beside me, and for me to turn up the whites of my eyes at. It's about all I

can do except talk and eat. How pleased I ought to feel that I've escaped the poms and vanities of this wicked world, that I've been given time to repent, and can at least look forward to dying in my bed, instead of out of it—as will sometimes happen to even the salt of the earth.”

She paused to laugh with a measureless scorn that was grand in its way, then stopped suddenly and said:

“Do you know how old I am? Not quite twenty-five, and I am *dead*—dead but for a heart and brain that burn and burn and burn——”

I asked some questions.

“They have tried everything,” she said savagely; “electricity, everything, and now they let me alone. Paralysis is the curse of our family—it strikes the child in his cradle, the mother by her husband's side, and to begin with, we are all so intensely alive, alive to our finger-tips! You must have noticed it,” she added abruptly, and with that sovereign air of addressing an inferior that seemed habitual to her.

“Now paralysis loves to strike the fully alive—the slow and torpid are akin to him, his brothers and sisters once removed, and he passes them by with

the contempt that one mostly feels for one's relations. Ah, ha! he says, you must be *alive*, you must be tingling with life to know, to taste what death *is* . . . and he freezes the strong body, chokes the full currents of its blood, leaves the living heart in the dead body, and you have all the anguish of life with none of its sweets, and the chill forgottenness of the grave, without its rest. You are an incubus to what you love best on earth, a corroding curse to a self that loathes its other self——”

She stopped abruptly and laughed—laughed discordantly, and in the pauses that followed, the soft roll of carriages came to our ears from the street beyond, and that hum of life of which she so intimately knew the meaning.

“If only I had had warning,” she said presently. “Do you think if I had known it was coming on, I should be lying here? I have my own ideas on such points, and I think that death should be death and life life—but death in life, and life in death is unnatural, abhorred of Nature and never intended by it. One note of warning, and I would have died *whole* and beautiful—my end would have been tragic, horrible, but my admirers would have remembered me so, and my husband . . . he could never have

(her voice sank to a whisper, but I caught the words) have forgotten me then. But now—I am only ludicrous—people laugh—and pity. To be pitied! O God, Sabine Norton to be *pitied*! They say, ‘She is dead all but for a wagging head and tongue,’ and I am already forgotten. What the eye don’t view, the heart don’t rue, and I never made anyone of my lovers friend enough to go on loving me when I was clean out of sight. You must care a little yourself to do that.”

“And you did not care?” I said idly.

“No. I never loved but one man, and him I married. I could never be bothered with any of the rest. And I loved clothes—not intrigue. There’s much more fun to be got out of clothes—and far less trouble than the other. Some women go through life carrying a latch-key that they slip into every door worth opening—and no one is the wiser; others who are fools, carry a large, rusty door-key, and it is so large and makes so much noise that everybody sees and hears when she tries to use it, so they are bowled out, and everybody cries ‘O! Fie!’ Well, I never could be plagued with either the one or the other, and a woman doesn’t deserve to be born who doesn’t find out that the less she cares

for the men, the more they care for her. So I always had a *succes fon* with men, and some husbands might have minded, but mine—didn't."

Jealousy is the core of love, I thought; and my pity for her grew.

"Why do I talk to you like this?" she burst out suddenly. "I don't know; I didn't to the other ones. Only you are more used to death than life, and nothing can shock or astonish you. Would you mind ringing that bell?"

I rang, and almost on the instant, a door opened and a middle-aged woman entered, carrying a tea-tray which she arranged on a table at a distance, then without a glance towards the bed or me, withdrew.

"Lydia," said Mrs. Norton, when we were alone. "A good creature, I believe, but I don't know, for I never spoke to her and I have forbidden her to look at me; and, strange to say, she never does. Whatever her faults may be, curiosity is not one of them, and I believe she respects my desire not to be made a peep-show of. Will you pour out the tea?"

I did so, and brought hers.

"It is a pity I have such a good appetite," she said, while I was feeding her, "now if I could only

make up my mind to starve myself I should die; but I can't. It's a poor thing to come to, to love nothing but your dinner, isn't it? It's what *I'm* coming to fast."

I left her and sat down at the distant table. Presently she called out to me:

"You must have been pretty once."

I did not answer. The temptation was strong on me to say:

"I am Lyndsay Gray—the woman your husband loved, and would have married, had you not lied and forged to separate us. Do you wish me to stay and nurse you *now*?"

But I did not say it. She might have laughed in my face and asked what that signified? And *he* had forgotten my very face, and the humiliation of forcing myself on his recognition would be too keen.

And the temptation to study her, to know her, to find out by what force of beauty, or charms or brains she had taken him from me, was strong upon me, side by side with that impulse of pure humanity which, thank God, was not dead in my breast.

Presently Mrs. Norton pointed out to me my quarters, and I rose to look at them. Occupying

one corner of the great room was a small camp-like bedstead, and on one side a costly table upon which were jug and ewer; on the other a bureau inlaid with mother-of-pearl and with deep wide drawers, in which a moderate wardrobe could easily be stored.

The whole was enclosed by a screen not more than five feet high, and so beautiful that I longed to reverse it, so that I might have it to look at during the night.

"Where are your things?" said Mrs. Norton abruptly. "You may as well arrange them before dinner."

"I started at almost a moment's notice," I said; "but they promised to send them after me. May I see if anything is outside?"

She nodded, and I opened the door. My box met my eyes as a welcome and familiar object on the landing, and I promptly dragged it in.

"You are very strong," said an envious voice from the bed.

I unlocked the trunk, and transferred its contents to the bureau drawers. From where she lay, although far distant, she could watch me, but she made no remark until I lifted out my desk, and then

she called me so suddenly that I went to her with it in my hand, thinking her in sudden pain.

“What an old-fashioned concern,” she said curiously. “I didn’t know people ever used such things nowadays. What do you keep in it—your diary—or your love letters?”

I felt my face change, felt as though she were reading my very soul, and knew that *his* letters were within half a yard of her. Then I moved away, resolving that at the first opportunity I would destroy those passionate tokens that were all that now remained to me of Hardress Norton’s love.

“So you have had your romance, too,” said she presently, and there was satisfaction in the way she mentioned the past tense. “Some day you shall tell me all about it—when I am tired of talking to you.”

But she never grew tired of talking of herself. The whole world was merged in that, to her, vitally interesting personality, and I must confess that I too came to find it interesting, even if its study was a bitter and unprofitable task.

For on that first day she appeared at her very best, and I never afterwards felt so strongly for her, or put myself in her place so completely as I did then.

And I can say now, now that every shadow of self-deception is cleared away, that I did not think of *him* at all at that time, that I had neither fear nor desire of seeing him, he was so simply wiped out in the identity of this woman who must always have been stronger than he, or why did she and I stand in such a position to each other now?

And when, at midnight, having attended to all her needs, and administered her sleeping draught, I at last lay down on my bed behind the screen, I was too worn out with fatigue even to think about the strangeness of it all, but fell straightway into the blessedness of sleep.

CHAPTER V.

“Gowden glist the yellow links
That round her neck she'd twine;
Her een war o' the skyie blue,
Her lips did mock the wine.”

I DULY telegraphed the two bulletins a day to Hardress Norton, and at the end of a week, his mother having rallied greatly, he returned. There are men, not habitually negligent or unobservant, who do not even see things and people outside their radius of action, commerce or conversation, and one servant is exactly like another, save, perhaps, in a difference of petticoats and pantaloons, while the face goes for nothing; so that when on the following morning, Hardress Norton paid his wife a visit, he apparently glanced at my cap only, as I stood apart, and addressed such remarks as he did make to that article of my attire and that alone.

Once more I saw her hungrily, thirstily, cover his brown face with kisses, once more her voice took on that sound like to the babbling brook:

“In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.”

and once more I knew that for love's sake and love's alone, she had stolen him from me.

She had told me frankly enough—with the frankness that was so insolent, why she had loved Har-dress Norton.

“All the women were in love with him ; he can make anyone he likes fall in love with him still, and I was as bad as the rest,” she said. “It was *roturiere*, vulgar, tasteless, to be one of a flock of sheep, but I came under his spell, and succumbed. I don't know what his charm is ; I've never been able to analyze it, but it's there.”

I drew a deep breath—yes, it was there. I too had fought against it—in vain.

Was it his strength, or the self-control that was almost imperturbability that made him seem a tower of strength upon which all essentially feminine creatures loved to rest, to repose themselves ? Yet these would have gone for little without the *heart*, chivalrous and noble, that reformed his every look, word and deed, and that made him, for all his reserved strength, no match for an unprinci-

pled woman, or chicanery of any kind. Dark, strong, swift, what did it matter that he had no beauty to commend him, nay, for that very reason did we not love him the more?

The mere fact of loving satisfies some women—did it satisfy Sabine Norton?

Perhaps she could not help her passionate, wayward temper—the temper that estranged everybody, and that had clearly estranged *him*. Somehow, I could not but think then of a toy that an angry child has beaten to pieces and that he loves for all his anger, cherishing the broken pieces and holding them to his breast, and once again I was sorry for her—almost for the last time.

“Hardress hates nurses,” she broke out, furiously and savagely, one day, “so you can go out of the room when he comes, and he will sit with me in the afternoon when you are out walking.”

I replied, coldly enough, that I did not think that he had noticed my existence at all, but I would be careful in future not to give him a chance of discovering it.

I was making her toilette of vanity at the time, scrupulously carried out each day, and she jerked from my hand the exquisitely round cleft chin

that was one of her greatest beauties. It was marvellous how, without bloom, without happiness, without hope, she remained beautiful as a masterpiece of Phidias himself.

"You have a frightful temper," she said, "and no wonder, you eat little and you drink water. A woman who can't enjoy good food and good wine is a fool, and there must be something wrong about her somewhere. What are you thinking about?" she added angrily, as I smiled.

"That you are a very ill-bred woman."

"So I have been told before. Though, if birth goes for anything——"

"It very often doesn't," I replied. Then, when I had cleared away all the impedimenta of the toilette, I said, "Shall I read to you now?"

"Yes. You'll find a pile of society papers over there. Society! The people who are in it seldom or never write about it, but it is amusing to hear what the outsiders say."

I read, and she kept up a running commentary on the various names mentioned, until I thought of Vivien, and how her tongue rages like a fire amongst her acquaintance, leaving no woman pure, and no man brave.

I laid down the papers at last and said,

“Do you number one good woman amongst your acquaintance?”

“Not one as good as myself,” she said, coolly.

“I wonder what the others must be,” I said almost unconsciously.

“How can one of your class be a judge of mine?” she said insolently.

“We see a good deal of you,” I said, as I drew some knitting from my pocket, “behind the scenes. We glide in and out; to us are given the keys of all the skeleton cupboards, and we know more than even the doctors themselves. We assist at the realities and not the shams of life, and in time we become philosophers, or, as you would call it, clear-eyed, hardhearted.”

“There is no doubt about your being the latter,” she said, fiercely; “but I was just the same, myself, once. You must suffer hard before it hurts you to see other people suffer, and I never had an illness in my life till this stroke. What did I want with sympathy? I don’t want it now—but I must talk, talk, or the little that is left alive of me would die too—perhaps. Do you think that would be desirable?” she added.

I did not answer her. Through the open doors we could hear the throbbing summer life go by, and I could not but think of all that the sound meant to her, and of what she had been last season, and had meant to be this.

“They used to call me the Goddess of Health,” she said, as if reading my thoughts. “I like the title better than *Venus Victrix*, for I was proud of my strength, and of always being perfectly fresh when other women were washed-out rags. I loathed the very thought of disease, of suffering, but now—O! for one real thrill of pain—to be racked with it from head to foot till I shrieked aloud, anything rather than this eternal numbness. I could bear it better if I had one hand free with which to beat this—corpse.”

She spoke the last word, looking down at the shrouded outline on the bed, with fiercest loathing, and once again I pitied her with the pity of one who grieves because he cannot pity more.

“I may live for years like this,” she went on after a pause, “but of course you know that. When I realized what had happened to me—for I went to bed perfectly well, and woke up to find myself in a coffin, with only my head free—I implored my husband to

kill me ; I bribed every servant who came near me with offers of my jewels—anything—to pour a dose of poison down my throat ; but no one would do it ; and then they drenched me with opiates, but did they bring me sleep ? ‘God giveth his beloved sleep,’ but mine was neither sleeping nor waking, but resembling that grief of which Coleridge speaks, ‘drowsy, dull and unimpassioned—a grief without a tear.’ Well,” she laughed shortly, “I don’t importune anybody for the means of death now, on the contrary I make most people wish themselves dead who approach me.”

“That is true,” I said gravely.

She laughed.

“You are not a bad little nut,” she said, “and really I think you must have been pretty once. I told Hardress so, but he said he hadn’t noticed. Draw the blinds closer. People will be going out of town soon. How sweet the mignonette smells ! Did you write to Piesse and Lubin for those things ? Alfred must be talked to, that *consomme* last night was not up to the mark. And the strawberries from Norton Court are not good—tell the people downstairs to send to Covent Garden.”

CHAPTER VI.

“O often have I dressed my queen
And often made her bed;
But now I’ve gotten for my reward
The gallows tree to tread.”

SHE had commanded a dress rehearsal, or rather parade, and the bed, the chairs, the very floor were all cumbered with the rolls of cloth of gold, cloth of silver, brocade and lace that I drew from the wardrobe to lay before her.

She had made me twine round her brows a green and gold wreath in which she looked like a Bacchante, and when I told her so, she said, “It is good to look a thing and not feel it,” scornfully, but for the moment, her face *was* that of a Bacchante, into which the color of flesh and youth and wine had come. Moving joyously round the helpless body, reminded me more than ever of the mummy at the Egyptian feast.

But soon the color faded, the wreath was a mockery, I removed it, and went back to the gowns,

everyone of which was a memory, and every memory a triumph.

"I danced at a Court ball in that," she said, as I held up a miracle of frosted loveliness to her gaze, and all the men went on like fools, and Hardress told me when we came home that he had got the most beautiful woman in the whole world for his wife."

"You seem always to have worn white," I said.

"Always. There is no such background for a woman's skin, and after all a woman's skin should be her chief beauty. Mine was," she added, with a little, bitter, angry groan.

I did not hurry over a business that so evidently pleased her, and being but a woman, I enjoyed looking at them too, each one being further embellished with a little historiette of what she had said, done, and looked in it, though the result was pretty much the same—that she had infuriated the women, bewitched the men, and had a high old time of it generally.

I could well believe it. Besides, I had often heard of her triumphs. She had not been called the beautiful Mrs. Norton for nothing, and what had now devel-

oped into a radically bad temper may have been then but a touch of waywardness, that some men call spirit, and admire amazingly.

I was holding one of the rich stuffs against my black gown, and only her head showed above the billows of finery, when her glance went past me, and her eyes lit up, and I knew that her husband had come in at the door behind me.

I turned sharply away to hide the color in my face, and with her robe trailing over my skirt, went away into my little screened apartment, and sat down on the side of my bed, trembling. It was rarely indeed that he and I came to such close quarters, as his visits were now always paid in the afternoon, while I was out; and even if I returned to find him there, the width of the great room was always between us. Presently I became aware of the gold and silver stuff mingling with my black gown, and I folded it up, angry that my self-control had so suddenly failed me, and wondering into what I might be betrayed next. Supposing that he should one day look me full in the face and recognize me, what could he think but that I had come here in masquerade to be near him? He might think—but I shrank from pursuing the idea further, only wishing with all my

heart that I had not yielded to the impulse of pity that had bade me stay.

Presently I heard the door close, and her voice calling me.

“Come put away all this finery,” she said, then as I lifted some of it from the bed, looking at me with angry, suspicious eyes,

“Why did you color up like that when my husband came in, and run away, so preoccupied, too, that you did not even notice that you were wearing my gown?”

“He startled me,” I said calmly, as I folded a train.

She laughed acridly.

“Confess that you admire him too,” she said, “because he is big and strong, and dark and ugly—the very man to show a woman’s beauty off, and after all that’s what a woman likes best. I never could endure a handsome man myself; he usurps the sole prerogative of our sex; and men were not born to be admired, but to admire us.”

I did not pursue the subject, but I saw that she was studying me at intervals throughout the day, thus revealing to me an entirely new phase of her character, viz.: that she was morbidly, blindly jeal-

ous, and that she did not believe it possible for any woman to so much as look at her husband without falling in love with him.

I smiled drearily at the thought, for it seemed to me hundreds of years ago that I had loved this man, who had been to me the very embodiment of moral as of physical strength, and who had yet been weak enough to let a woman ruin his life.

And from that day, whether alertly relating to me her conquests, or railing at me for my stupidity, or showing to me her jewels (of which indeed he appeared to have been far more lavish than his love), or displaying with equal profusion a varied assortment of vices, both large and small, I dated a change in her, and saw that at intervals she regarded me positively as a woman, and not the mere machine for which she had at first taken me.

It never seemed to occur to her that I had been in her own station of life, that these exquisite surroundings in which my homely black dress and white cap made the only discordant note, must be natural to me as the air I breathe, or I should constantly have expressed or felt admiration and surprise. One must be born into taste and brought up in it from infancy to really possess it, and no teach-

ing on earth will make the vulgar man or woman acquire that curious quality described as "the mind's tact," which is at once a delight and a scourge to the person who possesses it. The beautiful Mrs. Norton did not possess that, any more than other fine qualities likely to discommode her, and though she had a perfect genius for clothes, there her powers ended. But she had sense enough to place her house in the hands of artists, and when she told them to give her a white bedroom, she got it, and being a thorough Pagan in her sensuous enjoyment of life, it had given her nearly as much pleasure, perhaps, as it now gave me.

More than all, the flowers—constantly changed before a leaf or blossom might wither—were a perpetual joy to me, a fact that awakened Mrs. Norton's scornful surprise, for she cared nothing about such simple pleasures, or for animals or children.

To quote a small trait, but a cruel one—the day after I became her nurse I found in a corner of the room, huddled up at the bottom of his gorgeous cage, a bull-finch, starved to death. His crock was empty, there was not a grain of seed near him, and in the midst of plenty he had died.

I asked her how this had befallen, and she said :

“ Oh, my maid used to look after him, and I suppose Lydia forgot him. Servants never remember things of that sort.”

“ The more reason why their mistress should,” I thought, and my heart ached as I put the poor little body, starved in his gay prison house, outside the door.

She laughed at me as I came back—this Pagan, to whom life meant one long, sensuous gratification, and to whom life was death now she could no longer enjoy it.

“ How little you must have had to care for in your life,” she said one day, contemptuously, when I was arranging some roses, “ to enjoy mere vegetables like that. There are so many things worth living for—so many ! ” She moved her head to and fro on the pillow after her usual restless fashion. “ But what should you know of such things ? You are not a society woman. You have never tasted the wine of life.”

“ No—thank God,” I said.

“ You are not cut out for it,” she said calmly. “ A real woman of society is born, not made. And the wrinkles in your forehead show that you have a heart. By the way, how old are you ? ”

“Twenty-four.”

“You might be thirty-four. So you would never succeed—no woman with a heart does. You can only govern men by caring absolutely nothing about them, by feeding it—still with beauty, no illusions, a first-rate house and *chef* and a sharp tongue you ought to be able to hold your own—and live.”

“Yet you married for love,” I said, half under my breath.

She laughed.

“I was engaged to another man when I met Hardress Norton,” she said, “quite as rich, much better-looking—but I fancied Hardress.”

A smile came over her mouth, and a light into her eyes; it was easy to see how she could bewitch or be-devil a man to anything she pleased, and what chance had any ordinary woman against her?

“My brother Esine and Hardress had been very pally,” she went on, “when they got thrown together in Egypt, and they came home together—to my mother’s house. She is dead now. Do you wonder that you never see any of my people here? I hate relations and catch me letting them in here to preach at me when I’m not able to get up and turn them out! Well, Hardress knocked up with

fever the very day after he got back, and I nursed him."

She laughed again, with a swelling note of triumph in her voice that turned me sick—for well I remembered how dear that triumph cost me.

"He was engaged to a little fool in Devonshire," she went on, "and called on her when he was delirious, and wrote to her when he was sane. I watched his face while he waited for the replies. None came. Never in all my life did I care for anything I could have—it must be something out of my reach, and this man who scarcely looked at me seemed to be that."

She paused and I waited for more, my heart beating so loudly I feared she would hear it. "All things come to him who waits," she said, "and Hardress came to me. The girl jilted him."

I lifted my head and looked full in her blue eyes, and for a moment she blenched visibly.

"Jilted him and married somebody else," she went on hardily the next moment.

"Who brought the news?" I said hoarsely.

"My brother. He had stayed in Devonshire with Hardress and knew the girl—a pretty little dollish fool."

"How did Mr. Norton take the news?" I said, forced to put down my knitting lest the trembling of my hands betrayed me.

"Had a fresh access of fever. Nearly died. I nursed him past the turning to death's door. When he recovered we were married."

In the scarcely perceptible pause between the two last sentences, I saw vividly a gulf that she had bridged by tears, entreaties, seductions, sheer loss of womanly pride—and what other and guiltier aids?

"Why do you look at me like that?" she said, furiously, and her fury seemed always the more terrible for its helplessness, because she had neither hands to strike, nor any power with which to enforce her authority. "She was false to him, and he found a woman who could be true."

"But *was* she false?" I said, the question, as it were leaping out of me, without my own volition.

Mrs. Norton looked at me with that imperial air which became her so much better than that of mere vulgar anger, and said curiously,

"What do *you* know about it?"

I shook my head and bent closer to my knitting, for the worst tellers of secrets are our eyes,

and their mode of conveyance is swifter than lightning, and what they speak is the living truth.

“I think she must have been just such a little brown mouse as you,” she went on meditatively, then added with a fine indifference to my feelings, “and I hate brown mice. They nibble their way into a man’s heart and—stop there. And a woman can do anything—anything, except fill a heart that is already full to the brim.”

I ventured to look at her. Scorn, hatred, jealousy had sounded in her voice, and spoke on every feature of her face, betraying that however she might boast of her husband’s love, she knew that she had never really possessed it, and hated fiercely the woman who had.

Suddenly her mood changed, and she laughed. “Men are selfish brutes,” she said, “but after all, I like them better than women. They don’t see through you as a woman does, they make excuses—a woman doesn’t. And they have more real tenderness than women. We call sentiment, gush; fondness, liking; being kind to people, tenderness; but it’s the mock article, not the real, and there’s no strength in it, like a man’s.”

As regarded her husband I knew that she spoke

truth. He was a man who could not be unkind to a woman, even if he did not like her, and it is such men as these who are always secured by such women as she.

But from that day onward, it seemed to me (perhaps because she was angry at having made any confidences to me) that she became more hard and exacting, more bitter in tongue and temper, and I also thought that she watched me with a covert scrutiny that prepared me for questions that I had quite resolved to answer—with the truth.

And all this while his letters and a certain little bottle that I kept to remind and shame me of a moment in my life when I had been in very truth mad, lay in my writing-desk, the key of which always hung about my neck.

I could easily have taken them out with me, during my daily walk in Kensington Gardens, have torn up and scattered the letters, and thrown the bottle into the pond, but some fatality held me back, and after all the poison was destined to do its work, and to still a heart upon which the likeness of Har-dress Norton was indelibly stamped.

Dr. Du Pre came frequently, sat beside her, paid her compliments, and always went away fairly be-

witched and with the shortest of memories as to her many shortcomings.

Once outside the door indeed, her influence ended, and he was able to feel and display a little pity for me.

One day I followed him out, and asked if her increasing irritability were a good or a bad sign.

"Neither," he said; "but the hopelessness of her state will weigh on her more and more, and naturally her temper will get worse, but her general health will probably remain good. She may live for years, and if she did not come of a highly neurotic family, in which early paralysis appears to be not the exception, but the rule, with her constitution she might have been a centenarian. She'll wear out a good many nurses before she wears herself out," he added, with a look that was much kinder than the words, and then he patted me on the shoulder, said I was a brave, good girl, and went away.

"Have you been fixing the date of my funeral?" said Mrs. Norton, when I returned.

"No, of mine," I said shortly, and to some effect, too, for the virulence of her tongue abated during the following days, though I observed that her hus-

band's visits became shorter and shorter, so that I constantly found her alone on my return from a walk: so silent that I wondered what plot was hatching, or what mischief she would be up to next.

Lydia still appeared, and disappeared, doing her work like an automaton, and so thoroughly, that I seldom had occasion to address a word to her, and never got any "forrarder" in my view of her personality and character than I had done on the first day I saw her. She never addressed or looked at her mistress, and her mistress never addressed her. No relatives came to the house, or if they did, were denied admission, so that save through me, her husband and Dr. Du Pre, Mrs. Norton's communication with the outside world was now absolutely severed.

"Do you think I want a pack of women here to gloat over me, and rejoice that I can never extinguish them any more, or take every male they have from them?" she said fiercely to me one day. "God knows I never wanted their men, except to make a crowd about me wherever I went—yet I know that they are sorry for me—that they think kindly of me. I would not mind some of them seeing me now, I should love to hear their pleasant

voices, to see their fresh looks—for it's a great mistake to think a beautiful, perfectly groomed woman is the smartest thing in creation: she isn't. The well-born, well-set up, well-groomed mare is infinitely smarter. But Hardress would not like it—and *cui bono?* I should only get a whiff, a maddening taste of the life from which I am shut out, and the existence of an unburied corpse would be worse than ever."

I might fill volumes with her talk, the talk of a Pagan who believed that we are born into the world for nothing but enjoyment; that if we have it, life is heaven; if we have not, it is hell; and against the fate that had cast her into this earthly purgatory, she raved and blasphemed with all the energy of a fiery, passionate nature that had never known discipline in any shape or form.

Once again I pause in my lonely retrospection. My eyes ache for weariness and memory refuses to give me back each monotonous hour that yet bore its indications of the final catastrophe—indications to which I was blind as a mole, and to which *he* was blind also. Even now I do not know at what precise moment jealousy of me arose, then suspicion, lastly certainty of my identity, or by what

means she carried out the fiendish plot by which I should be accused of her murder and probably hanged for it.

But if much is blurred and indistinct, that last night stands out clearly enough in which I committed a strange act of folly, for when at last I left my tormentor apparently asleep, and drew the screen to behind me, I kneeled down, and for the first time since I had entered the house, unlocked my writing-case, and looked at its contents. A slight sound in the room startled me, and I dropped both desk and letters, almost expecting to see a paralyzed arm reach over the screen and snatch them from me.

Huddling the papers back, I must have overlooked the little bottle of poison (which indeed had no label and looked innocent enough) and locking the desk, I crept into bed.

Now casting back my thoughts, recalling every conscious moment of that night, remembering vividly everything up to the moment I went to sleep, and more vividly still that to which I awakened, I am yet conscious that somewhere, thrust out of sight indeed, concealed in some locked recess of my memory, was *something*—something that eluded

and defied me, possibly only a dream that aped reality, but it was *there*—and I could not find it.

Cold and dread rose the thought within me, what if I had risen and in my sleep administered to her the potion that I had once, in the impious madness of my sorrow, bought for myself. In my sleep—ay, but such things have been done, such things will still be done, so long as soul and body war against each other, each living being has two selves, though oftentimes man lives and dies without knowing it or having to acknowledge the deeds and often sinful deeds of that double self. What had I done while I slept—while *she* slept also? I seemed to see one figure bending over another, a short, sharp struggle in a face only, a sudden silence, and then the penetrating odor of almonds spreading through the air and then between that and the morning—nothing.

I say that is what I fancied I *might* recall, if memory would allow me—yet hard as I strove, I could not recall any such thing—the door was locked against me.

I had never to my knowledge walked in my sleep, as never in my waking moments had I felt any desire to shorten this woman's miserable life,

though (and may God forgive me for my sin) I had once thought of taking my own.

But struggle as I would, still this thing was hidden from me, and I could not see it.

Whose voice is that sounding in my ears, and is it I, my very self, who am standing beside the dead woman, my hand on her cold breast, asking her over and over again,

“How did I do it? Why did you let me do it? How did I do it—why did you let me do it?”

All is pitch darkness around me, and with an awful sound of fear I realize that I have been walking in my sleep, that my tongue has been automatically bearing witness to something that I did in some former state of unconsciousness, and there is borne in upon me in a blinding flash of light that in very truth I am guilty of Sabine Norton's death, for that whether under the impression that I was administering to her a sleeping draught or otherwise, I gave her the poison in my sleep.

CHAPTER VI.

“And wae be to the Queen hersel
She micht hae pardoned me ;
But sair she’s strivin’ for me to hang
Upon the gallows tree.”

IN the gray of the winter’s morning I threw open the door and almost fell over Hardress, who was sitting in a chair drawn right across the threshold.

“Let me by,” I said, groping as one suddenly grown blind, and would have thrust past him, but he fairly lifted me in his arms and put me back in the room, while I struggled in vain to free myself, to escape anywhere—anywhere from that handiwork of mine that lay in the next room.

“My poor little soul,” he said, holding me, “they won’t let you out—someone is watching in the hall. And if you tried to run away, it would be construed into a confession of guilt. What a wan little face, and the fire is out——”

“Hardress,” I said, looking up piteously as a child into his face in the hard, chilly light, “it’s true ; I *did* kill her. I brought the poison into this house.

I gave it her. She is dead. I had some mad idea of escaping——”

“Yes,” he said, as he drew me through the door and closed it behind him, “it was a mad idea indeed, and you must be very mad to suppose that I shall believe such a wild story as you are telling me. You no more killed her than I did.”

“I did not know it till last night,” I said in a whisper. “I found myself walking in my sleep, and talking to *her*. There was always something that happened on the night she died that I could not remember—but I know now. She refused to have her sleeping draught that night, and said she would call out to me if she wanted it. That was the last thought I had when I went to sleep—that she might call me. God alone knows by what horrible accident I gave her the poison instead of the draught—but I did it.”

Hardress put me into an easy-chair, removed my bonnet, drew my cloak closer round me, locked the door, and put the key in his pocket, then walked over to the fuel-basket and proceeded to lay in and light a fire, after a man’s bungling but persevering fashion.

When it was fairly alight, he rang the bell, un-

locked the door, and ordered tea of someone who came, presently brought it to my side, and poured it out, all in such masterful fashion that I fell into my old habit of obedience, and drank it.

“Now, Lyndsay,” he said presently, “you are better and able to talk sense. The long night alone in this room has turned your brain—and no wonder. The only astonishing thing is that the last months have not made an idiot of you—and if you were not the bravest and pluckiest little girl in the world, they would have done so.”

“Hardress——” I began.

“Put your feet to the fire, child, so. You have me to take care of you now, and I mean to do it thoroughly. Do you think I am going to let you slip through my fingers again?”

“Hush!” I cried shuddering. “She will hear you! And it is you who are mad, not I. Yesterday I believed that she had deliberately died to keep us forever apart, to-day I know that I wronged her—and indeed how could she possibly have carried out such a thing? And she would be alive at this moment but for me. Ask your common sense. Who could have killed her but me? We were locked in alone—two women, and one died.”

Hardress shook his head imperturbably, and I felt that he was a tower of strength against which, alas! I dared not lean.

"Someone was concealed in the room," he said, "someone who got out in the confusion next morning, and who had been bribed by her to give the poison, knowing that suspicion would fall upon you."

I shook my head.

"Was she a woman to give up her life willingly, even to be revenged on anybody? Such as it was she loved it, and I never saw the smallest sign that she had discovered my identity. I was blind and mad to let myself be persuaded into staying when I knew who she was," I added bitterly; "it was an utterly false position from the first."

"A mistake, certainly," said Hardress, "but a generous one in which you took thought for others—none for yourself. You pitied her—you pitied me, *ergo* after your old self-sacrificing fashion, you never thought of the risks you ran, or that because I had not recognized you at first sight, I should not recognize you afterwards, but you were mistaken. Something familiar in your air and figure struck me the second time I saw you, but you kept your face obstinately averted, and I could not

be sure. Then I watched you go out and in, but your veil was thick and your hair is darker, child, than it used to be, and once you walked like a fairy——”

“That was a long while ago,” I said drearily.

“But when you were showing off her gauds to that poor woman I saw your face distinctly, and knew. I was so astounded that I am sure she guessed something, and never ceased to watch the pair of us till the end. I think she was always worse to you when I was anywhere about than at other times. Sometimes she used to treat you like a dog. My blood boiled with rage, and she saw it. Often I longed to say to you ‘Go away before your health and spirit are entirely broken, for she is not worth it, and she may do you a mischief yet,’ but I did not. Brute that I am, the mere chance sound of your voice, and fugitive glimpse of you now and then made me insanelly happy, though I wondered then, as I wonder now, where is your husband, Lyndsay, and how do you come to be out alone in the world earning your own bread?”

I bowed my head on my hands and wept—wept unwonted tears for pity and gratitude at this love of his for so poor a thing that lived through deser-

tion, betrayal, and years of absence, and was as tender, strong and unselfish as ever.

“You have not been happy,” he said, in the rough voice of a man in pain, “and I don’t even know the name of the fellow—you spoke only of yourself in the letter that you wrote to tell me that you were going to be married.”

“What!” I cried, lifting my pale, blurred face. “I wrote to tell you that I was going to be *married?*”

“I’ve got it here!” he said, looking at me with astonishment, and he took out a pocket-book from which he produced a shabby bit of paper that had been so often folded and unfolded, handled and replaced, that it fell almost in pieces as he spread it out on the palm of his big brown hand for me to read.

Oh yes! it was my writing, apparently, and it had my trick of wording, and in just such fashion might I have announced my treachery—had I committed it.

“Hardress (it said) you have been away too long, and I could not remember you always, and by the time this reaches you I shall be married. I was never worthy of you, and in time you will forget

me, and find some other woman to love you more faithfully and truly than did ever Lyndsay."

I read it steadily through, this scrap of paper that had signed the death-warrant of my happiness and his, and thought of the sickening days and nights in which I had watched and waited, first for his letters, then for him, and how in the newspaper one day, without the smallest warning, I had read the announcement of his marriage with a woman of whom I had never even heard.

"You were staying with the Nortons when you received that letter?" I said.

"Yes. I came straight through from South Africa with Norton. I was to stay there one night on my way to you, but I hadn't been in the house twelve hours when I was down with a return of a fever and went off my head for some days. The first thing I asked for, when I came to myself, was your letters, but there were none—and though I wrote repeatedly asking the reason of your silence I got no reply, until one day arrived—.this. Later on Esine came and told me that you were married. I think I went mad in those first days," went on Hardress, "indeed I must have done—to allow Sabine Norton to get the influence over me that she

did. She was a beautiful creature, but she might have been as ugly as sin for all I knew and cared. Well"—he colored and paused, "there are things a man can't talk about, and I believe after her selfish fashion she did love me, and whether married or single or dead, it was all one to me now I had lost you—and we were married. You know what she was," he added wearily, "and how utterly incompatible in temper, tastes, pursuits, everything, we were, but the world counted me a most fortunate man to own such a miracle of loveliness, and I became an object of envy where I was really one of pity. In the very zenith of her success came the stroke of paralysis—and you know the rest. No, one has been able to live under the lash of her tongue but you—and you did it for my sake—and may God bless you for it, child."

"Hardress," I said, "I did not write that letter. It is a forgery. I was never married. But I killed her—I killed your wife, and we are cursed by Fate a second time—and we might have been so happy!"

I covered my face, but at a low, hoarse cry of joy, of yearning, close at hand, I started up, falling back as he would have seized me, back and back, till I

had put a table between us, across which he stretched out greedy arms.

“Lyndsay, little woman,” he cried, “so you never have belonged, you never *shall* belong to any man but me.”

“Is this a time to talk of love?” I said harshly, unkindly; “and whatever she did, she has paid all debts, for she is dead.”

Hardress’s arms fell to his sides, and the glow faded from his face. He looked a weary and thwarted man, as he stood with that barrier between us, and my heart ached at the thought of all he had suffered for me, and all he would have to suffer—yet.

“You must go away now,” I said. “The whole household is talking about us as it is. They will say that we plotted the crime together——”

“The plotting was hers,” cried Hardress, with intense bitterness. “God knows I never suspected her of brain or cunning enough to carry out such a hideous scheme, but now that I know with what skill she separated us, I see that she was clever enough for anything. I am sure she knew for a long time who you were, and instead of being grateful to you, like a good woman, or turning you

out like a mere, jealous, hot-headed one, she deliberately set a trap for us both, and when she found that of no use, elected to die in such a way as to cast suspicion on you, and so effectually separate us a second time."

I shook my head.

"So I thought until last night," I said, "but now I *know*. The coroner will be here in another couple of hours."

"And you are going to stand up and confess to such a mad lie as *that*?" he cried vehemently.

"It will save trouble," I said, with the apathy of despair. And the deadliest form of despair is when it attempts no violence to self or others, for violence proves life, and true apathy is mental death.

"You have dreamed a dream, my poor little child," he said, with the passionate tenderness of a strong man deeply moved, "and no wonder—and you think it truth. But you have someone else to consider in the world beside yourself now."

"Hardress," I said, in utter despair, "can't you see that we shall *never* be anything to each other now? She kept us apart living, she stands between us dead—she was always Venus Victrix," I added drearily.

"You must have some sleep," he said, bending down to look in my eyes, "or your brain will go. Shut your eyes, and you will keep them shut from mere exhaustion. When you are wanted I will come for you."

He pulled down the blinds, drew my cloak closer around me, put a stool for my feet, then with a brief, swift touch on my hair, left me.

CHAPTER VII.

“ What’s greener than the greenest grass ?
What’s higher than the trees ?
What’s waur nor an ill woman’s wish ?
What’s deeper than the seas ? ”

It had surprised me a little that Lydia did not approach me, but I reflected that I had given her no opportunity of doing so, that indeed her presence had not been required in the death-room, for first the hired women and then the doctors had done all that was necessary, and since then I had locked her out with the rest.

But presently, some time after Hardress had left, a slight sound made me look up to see her standing beside me, neat, apathetic and pale as usual.

Suddenly there flashed across my mind the very different presentment I had seen of her last—a wild, terrified, shrieking woman, who, rushing in with the rest, would not even look at the sight to which her fellow-servants called her, but turned and ran headlong from the place as if pursued by the furies.

"Shall I bring you some breakfast, miss?" she said in precisely her usual tone, and her dull eyes met mine without a ray of expression or speculation in them.

"I have had some," I said, feeling comforted by her mere presence and homely question, so complete is that isolation of crime in which I knew myself to stand.

"You have not been to bed, miss," she said, and the accent was kind, and I thought that, knowing what she knew, and what all the house knew, she was acting in a very womanly fashion.

"Lydia," I said abruptly, "they say I killed your mistress—and they say the truth."

Her eyes dilated and contracted as she gazed at me. She seemed to be holding her breath hard.

"I did not know it at first," I said, "but I do now. I did not mean to kill her, but I did."

Lydia's face relaxed and she shook her head.

"I don't believe a word of it, miss," she said. "Did you—did you leave the door unlocked that night?"

"And if I had," I said, "who would be likely to do her a mischief? And who but myself could find the poison I had locked away?"

A tremor crossed her face.

"It was a pity you kept such a thing about you, miss," she said quite respectfully, "with the best of care it might lead to"—she paused—"accidents. Did master know you had got it?" she added, in a quiet, even tone that seemed to reduce the extraordinary question to one of baldest commonplace.

"And if he did know," I cried hotly, "and it was utterly impossible he *should* know, how could he have got into a locked room, and what object could he have in killing her?"

Lydia stood silent, her eyes on the ground, the type of a well-appointed servant in a gentleman's family—nothing noteworthy about her anywhere, yet somehow this quiet, dull woman, whom I had looked on as an automaton, seemed mistress of the situation, and I waited anxiously for what she should say next.

It came at last, taking my breath away.

"Master loved *you*, miss," she said.

"You talk like a madwoman," I said fiercely. "You never saw us together in your life."

"But I have seen him watch for you, miss," she said, calmly, "so have the other servants—and it

was a pity his face lit up so—it said such a lot.”

Each word this woman said, herself until now such a complete nonentity, confounded me more.

“So you were all spies,” I said sharply, “and little enough you saw for your pains. Perhaps you were good enough to take your gleanings to your mistress?” I added, with a sudden lightning conviction that this woman had all along been something very different to what I supposed.

“No, miss,” she said quietly, “you know Mrs. Norton never allowed me to approach her. But perhaps she saw that master——”

She paused, as I caught her arm and shook it.

“You have been spying on me,” I cried fiercely—“probably reading my letters.”

“How you do frighten a body, miss!” she said, “and you so quiet always. What letters were you talking about?”

“The letters I kept in my desk,” I said, trying to see through eyes that were lifeless as those of a fish; then I pushed her from me and ran into the next room.

I think I had forgotten for the moment that cold, white thing on the table, but I ran past it and so to my little screened-in chamber, where I kneeled down

beside the cabinet and dragged out my desk. It was empty—and the lock was broken.

Lydia had followed me in and now stood beside me. "What have you lost, miss?" she said, and there was a note in her voice—was it of defiance or of hardihood? that most disagreeably impressed me.

"You ought to know," I said, as I rose to my feet, "no one had access to this room but you——"

"And master," said the woman.

"How could your master have touched anything of mine when your mistress was always present?" I cried; "and a gentleman does not meddle with a woman's desk."

"He was often here alone when mistress was asleep," said Lydia in unruffled tones. "She sometimes slept of an afternoon, and more than once he rung for me to fetch him books and papers to read till she woke up."

I did not reply. I was studying her face intently, studied it until at last her eyes flickered.

"What had you to do with last night's work?" I said, quietly. "I know my own part in it—what was yours?"

The woman shook her head. It struck me suddenly that she was neater even than usual, and had

taken considerable pains with her appearance that morning. Why? And there were lines in her face that had not been visible yesterday.

"I brought up the things for the night, miss," she said, "and then went to bed. In the morning very early, your bell woke me, and I rushed down with the rest."

"But you could not have got in first," I said, thinking hard; "the others must have told you what had happened, for you shrieked, and would not go near the bed."

"'Twas all such a flurry, I don't mind much about it," said Lydia, calmly, "you were flurried enough yourself, I'll be bound."

"What was there to be afraid of?" I said. "She was dead—she could not hurt you."

"Not a bit, miss," said Lydia, in her usual automaton-like tone. "It's cold here, won't you go back into the other room?"

Mechanically I went. I noticed that she made a circuit, not to go past her late mistress, but once in the other room, she began to straighten the furniture, and mend the fire.

Presently she came back and stood before me, her hands folded on her white apron, and a strange look of authority on her plain features.

“Don’t you take it on yourself, miss,” she said. “Let them find out what they can find out for themselves. They’ve got to *prove* it, and they can’t. Can’t you say, miss,” and she dropped her voice to a whisper, “that you forgot to lock the door that night, and then it might be anybody, master or me——”

The curious persistency of her attack on Hardress puzzled me. She had no reason to like me any better than she did him, yet she had as evidently made up her mind to my innocence, as she had to suspect his, and actually went the length of accusing *him* in order to shield *me*.

“And supposing I lied about the door,” I said, “the poison was *my* poison, and I gave it to her in mistake for a sleeping draught when I was half asleep, or quite asleep, I don’t know which.”

Lydia shook her head.

“No, miss, you didn’t,” she said, with an energy that astonished me ; “you ain’t given to such foolish ways, and though that poor thing led you a dog’s life, you never had a thought of harm to her. But there’s others may have done—’twas enough to drive a poor gentleman mad to see the difference between you and she—and her temper ’ud wear any

man's love down inch by inch to the very ground. After all, 'twas but hurrying her a bit, and she'd have killed *you* if it had gone on much longer."

"Go," I cried, fiercely, "leave me—go!" and she went, leaving me to press my hands over my burning eyes, seeking to shut out the vision that rose unbidden before me of a man stealing in the dead of night to a helpless woman's side. . . . O! my God, had indeed *he* done it, and was that why he was so sure of my guiltlessness?

There were only us two—us two who ardently desired (dared we to speak as Nature dictated) her death, and one of us it must have been who killed her—but which?

CHAPTER VIII.

VENUS VICTRIX was holding her last *levée*, in her own white and beautiful chamber, and every man who looked upon her face was in her thrall.

I was *Anathema maranatha* to them—these men who saw only a lovely, helpless woman done to her death by the miserable creature who had crept into her house under the guise of a nurse, hating and loathing her for being the mistress of it—and with every wish and desire to steal her husband from her.

For when the purely formal proceedings were over, and before my cross-examination had begun, Dr. Du Pre produced from his breast pocket a packet of letters, and with a gravity that bespoke their importance handed them over to the coroner.

“I found this bundle of letters by Mrs. Norton’s side,” he said, “and their contents speak for themselves. They furnish the *motive* for what at first

sight appeared as stupid and senseless, as brutal a crime as was ever committed. With their evidence, and that of the empty bottle of poison which Miss Gray admits to have been hers, there is a sufficiently strong case against her."

I looked calmly at him as he spoke. Had he forgotten the life this woman led me—this woman who by the piteous manner of her death had been washed clean of all earthly stain?

There was a little silence, while the coroner unfolded one of the letters, and ran it through.

I looked at Hardress—he was calm, and with arms folded on his breast, returned my glance with a nod, full of encouragement and strength.

"These letters," said the coroner, addressing him, "were written by you to Miss Gray some years ago?"

"They were."

"When you expected to marry her?"

"Yes."

"Your wife was aware of the position in which you had formerly stood to Miss Gray?"

"I have reason to believe that she did know."

"She spoke to you on the subject?"

"Never."

“She was willing that Miss Gray should be her nurse?”

“Quite.”

There was no ill-feeling between your wife and Miss Gray?”

“Emphatically none, between Miss Gray and Mrs. Norton, but a great deal between Mrs. Norton and Miss Gray.”

“You mean——”

“That Miss Gray came to this house not knowing that she was going to nurse my wife at all. That she remained—when she *did* find out the truth—out of pure pity and goodness, Mrs. Norton’s temper being such that no ordinary nurse would remain with her.”

I saw the men’s eyes turn away with disgust from him to the witch’s face on the pillow, and I knew that they did not believe him; more, that they positively hated him for saying it.

“When did you last see Mrs. Norton?” was the next question.

“I wished her good-night late in the afternoon—as usual. I seldom visited her room in the evening.”

“And you did not see her again till you were called to find her dead next morning?”

“No.”

Lydia's pale eyes met mine. I nodded a little as if to say : “You hear ?” but not a muscle of her face moved.

“You parted on perfectly good terms with Mrs. Norton ?”

“Quite.”

“And knowing that she was jealous of Miss Gray, you thought it a desirable thing to retain that young lady in the house ?”

“Yes.”

“Your wife was completely paralyzed in body ?”

“Completely.”

“Absolutely incapable of lifting a finger, much less of administering poison to herself.”

“Absolutely.”

“You parted with her on perfectly good terms that night ?”

“I had not seen her since the afternoon ; we were on good terms then.”

“You never discussed Miss Gray with her ?”

“Never—save as a nurse, but Mrs. Norton seldom spoke kindly of anyone.”

The next witness called was Lydia Small.

She had been the sole person admitted to the

room save Nurse Gray, the doctor and Mr. Norton. Mrs. Norton disliked servants and hated to be looked at or addressed by one; so there was no conversation between them. She simply brought up the food, kept the room clean and so on, but did not even make Mrs. Norton's bed—that was done by the nurse. Mrs. Norton was a "difficult" lady to live with. Had often heard her railing at Nurse Gray, the only nurse who would ever remain with her. Had never seen anything wrong between Mr. Norton and Nurse Gray, for the simple reason that she had never seen them together.

Asked if Mr. Norton ever came to the room at night, she said he might have done, without her knowing it.

Respectful, stolid, matter of fact, the woman gave her evidence simply yet so convincingly that all felt she was speaking the truth. Judge then of the unexpectedness of the bomb she threw when she said quietly :

"It wasn't Miss Gray who did it at all, but somebody who got in when her back was turned, and hid himself behind the screen."

"Himself?" said the coroner, quickly.

"Yes, sir."

And she looked full at Hardress with eyes that said,

“Thou art the man.”

The gleam of independence flashing as it were out of the soul of the bond-woman electrified us all for a moment, then I sprang up, crying out,

“It is a lie! I killed her—there is the bottle to prove it, and the room was empty when I locked the door that night. Take me away, punish me, for I am guilty——”

“She doesn’t know what she’s talking about, gentlemen,” I heard Lydia’s calm voice say from a great way off. “She was fairly worn out with Mrs. Norton’s tantrums long before this happened. The person that wrote the letters most like knew where they were to be found, and why shouldn’t he know where the poison was too?”

“How do you know I kept them together?” I heard another voice say that sounded like mine, “and Mr. Norton knew nothing about it, and could not possibly have been in the room that night.”

But I knew as I gazed at the faces around me that Lydia’s words had taken effect, and that for the first time a possibility of my innocence had crossed these men’s minds.

"Where was the screen," said the coroner.

"In front of the door opening into the next room."

"But the outside door was locked," I cried out. "I locked both doors before going to bed—Mrs. Norton always insisted on it."

"Did you go out of the room at all that night, miss," said Lydia, with an odd persistence, "after I'd brought up the things for the night?"

I put my hand to my head—trying to remember. It was curious how the woman commanded all our attention.

"Yes," I said slowly. "I had written a letter to the matron of the hospital, had forgotten to give it to you for post, and seeing it after you had gone, ran down the front staircase and put it in the hall, knowing that it would go the first thing in the morning."

"What time was that?" inquired the coroner.

"The clock struck twelve as I returned."

"The gas was alight in the hall?"

"Yes."

"You saw no one?"

"No one."

"And you did not look behind the screen?"

“No.”

A juror here remarked that all these remarks seemed to him irrelevant, as I had confessed to the murder.

“Under a delusion,” struck in Hardress Norton, “bred by fatigue, anxiety and inanition.”

“A delusion amply corroborated by proofs,” continued the juror stolidly.

“You have none,” said Hardress, impatiently, “but a packet of letters written years ago and dishonestly filched from Miss Gray by someone in Mrs. Norton’s confidence, and an empty bottle that may have been—*must* have been emptied by the same confederate. If you want to find the real murderer,” and he lifted his hand to point at Lydia, “you will inquire into the doings of this woman that night.”

Lydia had been standing all the while, and she looked at her master with eyes and features expressionless as though carved in stone.

“Why don’t you own up to it, sir,” she said, “and save the young lady?”

It was an incredible speech to issue from the lips of a respectable, respectful serving-woman, but it seemed to me, if not to the others who heard her,

that some great passion, of either love or hate or despair had nerved her to utter it.

Hardress left the question unanswered, but appeared neither astonished nor angry. He regarded her as my partisan, and therefore with favor, and probably his indifference to the wild accusation spoke in his favor, for the jury appeared to attach no importance whatever to it, but a very great deal to the evidence against me.

And so it befell that I found myself committed for trial at the next assizes on the charge of wilful murder by poison of Sabine Norton, and that night, I slept in jail.

CHAPTER IX.

“O my tower is very high,
It's weel walled round about
My feet are in the fetters strang
And how can I get out?”

IN this only was Heaven merciful to me, that my trial was to come on very soon, and that I had not the tortures of hope and fear to undergo, for the result was a foregone conclusion, and the task of defending me was one of such mockery that Hardress had found it difficult to persuade anyone to accept it.

Money will do much, but it will not inspire confidence in a hopeless undertaking, and Mr. Surenna, who was preparing the case for the great Q. C., Mr. James, did not even attempt to affect any, though he was Hardress Norton's most intimate friend. He thoroughly believed my own version of the affair, that I had killed her indeed, but by misadventure, and without any conscious knowledge that I was committing a crime; but he was perfectly aware

that no judge or jury would accept this merciful view of my conduct, so that even if I pleaded guilty to manslaughter it was doubtful if it would avail me much or prevent my being found guilty on the capital charge.

He had gone exhaustively into every tittle of evidence for and against me, had subjected Lydia to the most searching cross-examination without eliciting a scrap of anything that could be twisted into evidence that she was in any way connected with the night's business, and was indeed convinced that she had an infatuated sort of attachment for me that would make her swear black white if by doing so there was a chance of saving me.

There was one circumstance and only one that suggested a strange hand in the night's work. A pearl and diamond pendant valued at £500 was missing from her jewel case, and although to those who believed me guilty of murder the attendant circumstance of theft only made me a trifle blacker than before, I, who knew my own innocence, could not but ponder as to whose hand could possibly have removed it from the cabinet close beside her, and in which Mrs. Norton's jewels were kept.

Still, I did not agree with Mr. Sureнна in his view

of the woman's character. I had taken too little notice of her, regarded her too indifferently to inspire her with liking for me, and although one woman might feel intense pity for another placed in my position, such pity did not account for her becoming my violent partisan to the extent of accusing an innocent man.

And yet, the servant with whom Lydia slept, the others in whose company she rushed, half-dressed, downstairs when the mad pealing of my bell woke them, all bore witness that she could not have been in the locked room that night, and everything went to support my own theory as to what really happened.

And yet—and yet instinct told me that Lydia knew something that I did not—that I probably never should know, as if she had been able to keep silence till now, she would probably continue to do so till the end. And it seemed to me incredible that I should have placed my cherished letters beside Sabine Norton, and I told Mr. Surenna so.

“The letters were the last thing in your mind that night—the letters and the fact that you might at any moment be called up to administer a sleeping draught,” he said, “and probably you supposed

yourself to be putting the letters away when you placed them beside her, just as you automatically gave her the poison instead of the draught. The only loophole of doubt is—whether the door you locked overnight was found locked in the morning—the second door, I mean—leading to the other room.

“I can’t tell,” I said, thinking hard. “People were rushing in and out, and I never thought of doors or locks, but of course I unlocked the one leading on the corridor by which they all came in. I am only positive that I locked both when I went to bed. Has it ever struck you,” I added, “that unknown to me, Lydia and Mrs. Norton may have been on confidential terms, and that in some way unknown to us, she made Lydia her instrument? That was my indelible impression when I saw her dead—that by some manner of means she had contrived her own death, so that suspicion should fall on me, and so——”

I paused.

“And so you and Mr. Norton would be forever divided,” said Mr. Surenna calmly, “a fiendish idea truly, and one that I should think she would have had quite sufficient determination to carry out—if

she got the chance. But there are few women who would consent to stain themselves with murder, even if heavily bribed to do so—the risks would be too certain, and I should say Lydia Small was the last person in the world to run her head into a noose to oblige anybody.”

“No,” I said wearily, “I know it’s impossible—but the idea is there. It’s in my mind, in my heart, and I can’t dislodge it. If Mrs. Norton really knew—as Mr. Norton says she did—that I was the woman whom he had loved and—and still regretted, her jealousy was so intense, her passions were so violent, that she would have gloried in a deed that entailed such awful consequences on him and me.”

Mr. Surenna shook his head.

“She was a woman who hated and feared death,” he said, “and she could have turned you out and kept *him*—for by every law of humanity he was bound to her—to the end of the chapter. And she might have lived for years.”

He was walking irritably up and down the narrow cell, with the irritability of a strong man whose strength is absolutely useless.

“You have had a rough time,” he said, “a very rough time indeed. Have you no friends at all?”

"None. My mother died—thank God—just after Mr. Norton's marriage—and there was no one else. I was on the ground, and I dragged myself up first to my hands, then to my knees, then to my feet, and at last stood erect, only to be struck down once more—to this. God puts a little black cross against some people from their birth—there is one against me."

"You don't deserve it," said Mr. Sureнна. "Tongues may lie, but faces never, and you've got a brave and a good and a sweet little face of your own, Lyndsay Gray. Norton was a fool—a *fool*—but, of course, as usual, the woman pays the piper. He never cared a button for any woman in the world but you—and if I knew him less well, I should say that he did it himself, and you were screening him."

"How could that be so," I said sadly, "when I did not even know that he had recognized me? We were not face to face more than twice the whole time I was in the house."

"More scamp he to let you stay, knowing the risk you ran," growled Mr. Sureнна. "But he's richly paid now."

"Yes," I said, with trembling lips, "his punish-

ment will go on, while mine—ends. After all, God is more merciful to me than to him. When—when it is all over, I will wish him good-bye.”

“You wont see him before?” said Mr. Sureнна, who was buttoning up his overcoat.

“No, only to say good-bye. Why do you believe in me?” I added almost fiercely, “No one else does—perhaps even Hardress in his heart does not think so—only he is one of those men who would stick to you through thick and thin.”

Mr. Sureнна shook his head.

“If he *saw* you do it, he wouldn’t believe it,” he said. I never saw a man so hard hit over a woman as Norton is over you. There’s only one thing,” he added, with a sudden change of subject, “that I think bears out in the slightest degree your suspicion of Lydia Small. She has a lover. And as in all doubtful matters pertaining to men, you *cherchez la femme*, so in all obscure affairs to do with maid-servants you should *cherchez l’homme*. I met her in the most out of the way place at a most unusual hour—and the man with her was an unmitigated scamp, who could not but leave his mark on her life. And yet I don’t see what hand he could have had in what happened that night.”

“Nor I,” I said, with the indifference of despair. But I had looked too long at death and suffering to be terrified as some women might be at the appearance of fate, and my chief longing now was to get it over—and rest.

“I wouldn’t tell you before,” said Mr. Sureнна, “for fear of raising false hopes, but I followed the man, and a detective is following up the clue. If the diamond and pearl pendant that was missing from Mrs. Norton’s jewels could be traced to him, we should have a pretty strong case against Lydia Small, in spite of her *alibi*. Only time is short and if anything is going to save you it must be done soon.”

“It won’t,” I said bitterly. “Providence never helped me, luck never favored me yet—and it won’t now. The few persons who took any interest in me opposed, tooth and nail, my training for a nurse, and every possible obstacle was put in my path; whatever I have done has been accomplished by sheer dogged determination. Such struggles strengthen a woman’s character, no doubt, but they also harden it.”

Mr. Sureнна shook his head.

"It would soon soften again if it got the chance," he said, then took my hand in his big one. I felt enveloped for the moment by the strong masculine presence, then he was gone.

CHAPTER X.

“My garters are of the gude black iron,
And oh! but they be cold ;
My breist plate is o’ the sturdy steel
Instead o’ the beaten gold.”

ALL things come to an end, and my trial and conviction went with velvet-like smoothness and despatch. The social fame and position of the murdered woman made the case one of great interest; and the circumstances as unrolled by the public prosecutor revealed me in a light that the worst of my sex might have shrunk from facing, and that I did not so shrink was accounted another proof of my callousness. Under the guise of a nurse I had sneaked into my lover’s house, presumably to continue guilty relations with him, while I had carefully hid my identity from the paralyzed wife who was absolutely dependent upon me, and whose very helplessness might have appealed to a heart of stone, while the pathos of her tragic fate, struck down in the very bloom of youth and bounding life would surely

have appealed to any woman who did not mercilessly hate her.

Step by step the old ground was gone over, and everything like a dexterously handled puzzle fell into its place, making a perfect whole. Time, place, opportunity, motive, the evidence of the empty bottle of poison, the almost equally damning evidence of the letters, all followed each other in harmonious sequence, and the only incident whose meaning was not patent to the meanest understanding was the incident of the missing pendant, for I could just as easily have stolen a dozen jewels as one.

“This poor lady’s life,” continued counsel, “stood between these two people and their guilty passion, and while the man wished it taken, the woman took it. They could not even wait till nature mercifully released her from her living death—she was in their way, and she must go. Yet, such as it was, life may have been sweet to her, so ardently do mortals cling to existence under even almost impossible conditions, and without a prayer, without a good-bye, with God knows what frenzied cry for mercy, she was thrust into the presence of her Maker. A more cowardly crime, or a more clumsily conceived and executed one, it would be impossible to

conceive. Her overpowering, mad haste to be rid of her rival seems to have been the dominant idea of the prisoner's mind, or possibly she thought the husband would bring such powerful influence to bear on the doctor's mind that her death would be attributed to a final stroke of paralysis, and no inquiry would be held.

"It is evident," he said in conclusion, "to the meanest observation that the accused is a woman of great nerve, self-control or reticence—as witness her demeanor in the dock this day. Not a tremor of fear, doubt, or hope crosses her face, and the youth and softness of her lineaments only make more apparent the callousness of the spirit that animates her.

I looked up and met Hardress's eyes. Involuntarily, and perhaps because it was the worst thing I could possibly have done, I smiled, and he smiled back at me.

The court faded, the man's biting voice was but dumb show, Hardress was mine—*mine*—and we loved one another, body and heart and soul. I should see him once more before I died—he would hold me in his arms, and we would forget everything—everything but that we loved, that we must

always love, and together we would ask God to grant us an hereafter in which we might be happy.

The witnesses, and they were few, came and went rapidly.

No new facts were elicited, and when Lydia Small was taxed with being seen under unusual circumstances with a man of doubtful character, she at once admitted it, and said he was her brother-in-law, whom she occasionally befriended for her sister's sake. And with her departure from the box went my last chance.

I scarcely heard Mr. James's speech for my defence. It was ably delivered, no doubt—but it had no *raison d'être*, and convinced nobody. He simply threw the onus of proving my guilt on the prosecutor, and the prosecutor had done so. His view of my character as a woman who had remained to nurse my rival out of motives of pure humanity was received with a chilling air of doubt that might have dashed a more stout-hearted champion than he, and I could not but feel sorry for him from the bottom of my soul when at last he ceased, and sat down.

The judge made short work of the summing up, which was dead against me, and the jury made of theirs, even shorter.

It was still broad daylight when I heard addressed to me those most moving, solemn, terrible words that one human being can convey to another, the message, the hope of the innocent for the guilty, the prayer to God for that mercy which is denied to mortal lips to utter. I bowed my head as I heard them, making my own plea for pity, for forgiveness, and then they led me away.

CHAPTER XI.

“Sin’ I am standin’ here,” she says,
“This dowie death to dee,
One kiss o’ your comlie mouth,
I’m sure wad comfort me.”

So strong was the feeling against me and Hardress, that only with great difficulty could he obtain permission to see me once more, and I fixed the date of our interview for the night before the end.

A jailer would be present—but what matter? We had surely bought and paid for the right of one hour together, and it was more of that hour I thought than of what was to come, during the days that followed my conviction.

And now it had come to the very last day but one and I was happy—as a man is before he has grasped his morsel of happiness—not after, when I heard the heavy bolts of my door unbarred, and sprang up in fear.

Had he refused to wait any longer, was I indeed to go out into the great darkness, unwarmed, unsuccored by his recent touch and love? If I could only *feel* the clinging of his hand when I went, it would be nothing.

The door swung back, it was Lydia.

"You can have just twenty minutes," said the jailer, sitting down as far off as possible and unfolding a newspaper, in which he appeared immediately immersed.

I waited for the woman to come up to me—to speak, but she stood by the door, and when I looked more closely at her I saw that she had aged at least ten years since the day of my trial, and that even her bonnet was carelessly put on, and her cloak awry, and on her whole appearance was stamped that look of guilty shame that the merest child understands without knowing why.

I knew it all then, that in some way she had killed Mrs. Norton, and that she had come here at the eleventh hour to tell me so, and in a second I passed out of the cold shadow of death into the sunlit garden of life.

"Poor woman, poor soul," I said, and put my arms round her trembling body as she tottered towards

me, and then she broke down, weeping wildly and convulsively on my shoulder.

The turnkey just glanced at her, then back to his paper. He found it more interesting.

She soon pulled herself together, and wiped her eyes with something of the old stolid calm that had always distinguished her.

I drew her as far as possible away from the third person present, and we sat down side by side.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

Lydia drew a deep breath and folded her large hands, covered with black cotton gloves, on her lap.

"From the beginning, miss?" she said, wearily. "I've tried to piece it all together in my mind, and I can't rightly recollect how it began, but I think 'twas when she followed me about with her eyes, kind-like, when I was doing the room, and one day when your back was turned she smiled at me, and you know, miss, there was no resisting her smile, man or woman, 'twas all one—and I was a fool like the rest, and thought perhaps she wasn't so bad after all, and she'd a deal to suffer. And so it went on, she giving me kinder and kinder looks, till one day when you were out, I happened to go up for something, and she called me to her and said I didn't

look strong and I had better have some port wine every day, and she would tell Mr. Norton to see that the butler gave it to me.

“She didn’t say any more then except that I wasn’t to speak to her except when she addressed me, ‘or nurse will be jealous,’ she said, and laughed, and you know she was a witch, miss, and when she laughed it got into your head like wine, and she could do anything with you she pleased. After that I often went up when you were out—and sometimes she’d send you on errands at a distance, to get new books and so on, and many an hour I sat beside her, always getting away before your knock and ring came, and always taking care that Mr. Norton never found us talking together.”

Lydia paused and drew a long, weary breath. “She was so clever, miss, you know, and I was such a fool. She asked me about my family—it was wonderful the interest she took in our humble affairs—so I thought then—but I know better now. Very soon she found out that the trouble of my life was my young sister’s husband, a ne’er-do-well who broke up the home as fast as she made it, and who was the curse of her life and the poor little children whom he hated because they were mouths to feed.

But he'd got his friends, and one of them wrote from Australia saying that if he went out there with a few hundreds in his pocket, his fortune would be made, and I believe the man spoke the truth, and Simon was wild to go, and beat his wife and the children more than ever because he couldn't, and Milly was getting that desperate I shouldn't have wondered any day to be fetched to her drowned body—for that's the way most poor, desperate women come to an end.

“I didn't tell Mrs. Norton all this at first, for things weren't so bad then, but they got worse faster and faster after she'd condescended to notice and talk to me. One day she said to me, quite sharp and sudden like,

“‘Lydia, do you think Nurse is pretty?’

“‘I said I thought you were a douce little body, miss, but not a beauty, for who could be a beauty anywhere near her? Even her temper couldn't spoil her looks.

“‘Do you think she is the sort of person a man would admire?’ she said, her breath coming very quick and fast, so that I knew she was angry.

“I said I didn't know—men had such strange fancies—and that seemed to anger her more.

“ ‘I’ll tell you one person who admires her,’ she said in a breathless sort of way, ‘and that’s Mr. Norton!’ ”

“ ‘Oh, no, ma’am!’ I said, quite shocked; ‘he never sees her hardly.’ ”

“ ‘Yes, he does,’ she said; and then looking at me very strangely, she added, ‘I never asked the creature her name—what is it?’ ”

“I told her it was Gray—Lyndsay Gray.

“ ‘So, I was right,’ she said, after she had lain a long time with a look that frightened me on her white face, and her blue eyes—you know how intensely blue they were, miss—staring ahead of her, ‘and it is a plot between him and her—and I am mocked—mocked.’ ”

“I didn’t know what to say—I thought ’twas all fancy on her part—she having so little to think about and all—and worshipping, as she did, the very ground Mr. Norton trod on.

“ ‘What a fool,’ she said presently in a loud voice, ‘what a doting fool, never to have suspected it, and if I hadn’t caught his look at her. . . . They were engaged once, I tell you, engaged to be married. And he loved her—not me.’ ”

“I couldn’t but be sorry for her, miss, there was

such agony in her face, and she so helpless, lying there, and you able to run nimbly about, and please yourself in most things—and my sympathy goes with the wives, miss, and not with the other ones. They get enough sympathy from the men. I mean no harm, miss, but you'll admit things look black against you."

She paused again for a while, as if anxious to say something in apology, but after a glance or two at me went on again,

"Of course she saw that I was sorry for her. And without her saying a word, or me either, it was somehow understood that we were to watch you and outwit you if we could. I begged her to send you away—but she wouldn't—and said she meant to punish you first—though, God is my witness, I little knew how. Well, miss, we both watched, and all I could find out was that master watched you out and in, but I couldn't see that you ever had a word with him, and when she wanted to send you on messages to him, you wouldn't go, but always called me, so I thought you were deep, very deep, and I took her part all the more. This went on for some weeks, and meanwhile my scamp of a brother-in-law was behaving worse than ever. I sometimes thought

that Mrs. Norton, being such a rich lady, might have made me a present, besides being so sympathizing, but one day she called me to her and said :

“ ‘What money does that wretch want for going abroad ?’

“ ‘I told her three or four hundred pounds.

“ ‘If I had it I’d give it to you,’ she said in her off-hand way, just as if she were a queen, you know, miss, ‘but Mr. Norton would be angry with me for throwing money away like that. You see the money’s his, not mine.’

“ ‘I said of course he would, and I never dreamed of such a thing as her giving it to me.

“ ‘She lay for a good bit thinking and looking at me, then she said :

“ ‘My jewels are my own. If I gave you one of those you could turn it into money.’

“ ‘I said I couldn’t take it—folks would call it robbery, and I might get into trouble.

“ ‘ ‘Stuff,’ she said, then thought a bit longer, and said :

“ ‘ ‘I’m not such a fool as to help you for nothing. If I get your precious brother-in-law out of the country, you’ll have to do something to please *me*.’

“ ‘I felt myself tremble as I asked what it was.

“‘A mere trifle,’ she said. ‘I want you to bring me the desk in which Nurse Gray keeps her private papers. You must then take an impression of the seal in wax. You must obtain a key to fit that impression. And then—when I have sent her out of the way for a good two or three hours—you are to read me everything that desk contains.’

“‘It seemed to me a mean trick, and at first I said I wouldn’t.

“‘Then you don’t have the four hundred pounds,’ she said, coolly. ‘Think it over. The day you bring me the open desk and read me the letters, I give you an ornament to the value of five hundred pounds (it cost seven), so make up your mind.’

“‘I did make up my mind in less than twenty-four hours, and within two days I had unlocked the desk and was sitting beside Mrs. Norton, holding up the letters one by one before her eyes that she might read them. I saw a word here and there, enough to show me master had loved you dearly, miss, and I thought many a time she would have choked with jealousy and rage and misery before she’d come to the end of them.

“‘The brown mouse,’ she said to herself, over and over again, and when you came home that day,

miss, if she hadn't shut her eyes when you came near, I believe they'd have killed you. I was bringing in the tea—and I couldn't help seeing.

“After that she and I watched you and him as cats watch mice. But we couldn't ever find anything out. And whenever you were away she made me hold the letters before me, and she'd quote little bits out of them and laugh like mad, and sometimes I thought she *was* going mad, but didn't know it. She'd given me the diamond and pearl pendant, with a letter she dictated to me saying she'd given it to me, and she made me put the pencil between her teeth, and scrawled her signature, and, more than that, she promised to tell her husband later on that she'd given it to me, and like the fool that I was, I believed her, and never dreamed that she was making a catspaw of me, not caring if through doing her bidding I came to be hanged by the neck some day. And that's what I've got to come to, miss. And all for a brother-in-law and a female Judas.”

I looked at the turnkey. His eyes were still fixed on the paper, but they were stationary.

“I got the jewel sold—no matter how—and got four hundred and fifty pounds for it. I got a man of business, who'd been kind to my family, to take

the scamp's passage, get him an outfit, and leave him something for his pocket going out, and the rest of the money, all but a little I kept for Milly and the children, was sent out to the man who had wanted him to come. To tell the whole truth, it was a man who had been in love with Milly that wanted to save him, and the money was all safe with him. But at the last minute Tom went on the spree with every farthing he had, and refused to go to Australia at all. But that was after what happened that night. Only I got no reward for my sin—that's all—or Milly any benefit either. He'll go some day perhaps—after the money—but he'll kill Milly first."

"You have spoken of the letters," I said, "but what of the poison I put away in the desk with them?"

"I didn't know it was poison. Mrs. Norton saw it, of course, when I unlocked the box before her eyes, and she told me to uncork it and hold it to her nose. I did so—and noticed a smell of bitter almonds, but didn't know what it meant."

"‘Cork it up,’ she said coolly. ‘So Miss Lyndsay takes sleeping draughts, does she? And gets her bottle refilled every afternoon when she goes out. Sly!’"

“I thought no more of the bottle, but I got weary of standing up holding those letters before her face, till she must have known every word of them by heart. And I saw how every day a black, bitter rage against you grew, and at last she used to say, over and over again, ‘They are waiting for me to die then they’ll rush into each other’s arms, and I shall be dead—as much forgotten as if I had never lived to come between them. Think of it,’ she would say, clutching my arm, ‘think of me down there, and those two above with warmth, light, movement, music, health, *love*—and all the world for their pleasure-ground! I would live in torture till I was a hundred if I could, just to keep them apart—but I shall not—another stroke may come at any moment, and I shall die.’

The turnkey looked at his watch. The twenty minutes were up, but he did not interfere.

“I think she was always brooding over it—how after she was dead she could make it impossible for you to marry, and I believe she had made up her mind for some time—and it was a devilish plot enough—how she could do it. I fell into the trap, being taken on the hop like—and that’s how most foolish and wicked things come about in this world,

for if one only knew, one would have guarded against them."

The woman stopped for a moment, and still I did not see how she could have done this thing, not knowing, and I waited eagerly for more.

"But I've often wondered since, miss, that you didn't suspect she knew something—only you never seemed to think the worst she would put on you was anything but just her wicked temper—but she'd never look you in the face latterly, miss—did you notice that? or you'd have known. And you were real good to her. To see you dressing up her poor head every day, and all for him—to whom she was just poison, and bearing with her as nobody else would, well, miss, I just thought you were an angel, or else that you'd a reason for doing it best known to yourself. She always swore that there was an understanding between you and him, and set me to watch you both, but I never saw anything wrong, miss—and I don't believe you're so much to blame in coming there as people say."

"I did not know who I was going to nurse even till I got there," I said, impatiently, "nor that Mr. Norton recognized me—but that's of no consequence. On with your story."

“ Well, she was very cunning, as I say, miss, and she kept her own counsel. It never crossed my mind that the stuff in that bottle was poison—her saying it was a sleeping draught put me quite off it—and I had brought it to her almost dozens of times with the letters, and she never seemed to take any notice of it. But I know now what she meant all the while, and how she’d made up her mind to do it, sooner or later. And what might happen to me didn’t trouble her in the least. All she wanted was to die in such a way that the guilt would fall on you—and so you would be hanged. And she made sure I wouldn’t speak for my own sake—for by my being so sly towards you, she thought, no doubt, I was a right down bad one, but there she was wrong. I allow I oughtn’t to have let her give me that jewel unbeknown to master, and I was a sneak and coward to you, miss, but I never meant you any harm, and she couldn’t do you any either lying there—or so, I thought. And after all if you’d woke up, miss, when I came for the sleeping draught——”

“ Then there *was* some mistake after all?” I cried, starting up in wild excitement.

“ There was my mistake, miss, but none on your

part—it was all planned and thought out days and weeks before—yet it all fell out as natural and accidental-like as possible.

“I’d got into a way of often stepping into her room for a minute, even when you weren’t far off, and that night, when you went down to put your letter on the hall table, I was passing her door, when she called me in. I just stepped inside and put my finger on my lips, meaning you’d be back in a minute, but she said ‘Come in; she’s gone to post her precious letter herself,’ — and as I hadn’t seen you go down, I believed her, especially as just then the front door shut, and went forward into the room. I’d just got opposite the screen before the folding doors into the other room, when I heard you sneeze—almost on the threshold, and I’d barely shot behind the screen and kneeled down when you came in. You locked the door after you, and then began to settle Mrs. Norton for the night. I felt sure you’d come presently to see if the folding doors were safe and catch me, but I was too frightened to move, and as it turned out, you had locked them earlier in the evening, and at last you went to bed. I thought I heard you unlock the writing-case first, and the rustling of papers, but you were a long way off,

and I couldn't be sure. I heard what she said about the sleeping draught, and how she would call you if she wanted it. And then—after a long while, it seemed to me, as I kneeled there all cramped up, I heard your regular breathing and I knew you were asleep. But I was still afraid to move until Mrs. Norton called me very softly from the distance, to go to her.

“‘I'd better go, ma'am,' I whispered back, ‘she may wake up any moment,’—but she insisted in her breathless, passionate way and with my knees knocking under me, I stole over the soft carpet to her bed. She was laughing when I came near, but it was wicked mirth, and her eyes looked so strange they frightened me.

“‘Oh, ma'am,' I said, ‘how could you tell me such a story, to say she'd gone out?’

“‘I didn't,' she said boldly. ‘She said something about taking a letter to post, and I can't see from here when she puts her bonnet on—and I wanted to see you, Lyddy,' she said in that coaxing way she could put on sometimes, for all that she was such a queen.

“‘You might have got me into a fine bother, ma'am,' I said reproachfully, but she only laughed

again, and there was something reckless in her laugh, and a sort of fear too, like a man who puts his horse at a leap he knows will kill him, but does it all the same, though life's sweet and he loves it.

“‘Now you're here you must stop a minute or two,’ she said coolly, and then she seemed to draw a deep breath and said, ‘I want my sleeping draught. You may as well give it me.’

“‘How could I do that, ma'am,’ I said in a whisper, ‘when she'd find the bottle to-morrow morning and know that somebody must have been here to give it to you?’

“‘Can't you take the bottle away with you, you fool?’ she said so savagely I jumped back from her as if she might bite.

“‘I don't know where that idiot has put it,’ she went on, quite careless-like. ‘Do you see it about anywhere?’

“I looked among the things on the table close by, and saw a narrow, smallish bottle with some colorless stuff in it, and brought it to her.

“‘That's not it,’ she said irritably. ‘Probably she has taken it into her place, so as to have it handy when I call her. Go and see!’

“‘Ma'am,’ I said trembling, ‘I durstn't. If she woke up, the fright 'ud kill me.’

"She looked at me, and in the dim light I saw her eyes, just like a devil's.

" 'If you don't,' she said deliberately, 'I'll call out to her, and I'll swear you came to rob, perhaps to murder me, and that you stole the pendant I gave you.'

"I gasped at her wickedness—but I was frightened, and I wanted to get away, and by now I knew she was capable of anything.

" 'I'll go,' I said, shaking in every limb, and I stole across the room and looked over the top of the screen. You were deep in your first sleep. There was no small bottle on the cabinet near you, but lying on the carpet was one exactly like what I had seen in your desk, and which Mrs. Norton had declared to be a sleeping draught, and indeed it seemed to me to be the very same.

"I stole back to her, and it's come back to me often since, though I didn't think it strange then, that she said before I could open my lips, 'There's a draught in the desk, anyway—I will have it—I *will*.'

"I said, 'There's a bottle lying on the floor—is that the one you wanted?'

"Something flashed into her eyes, it seemed to me that even a quiver went through her dead body, and

it wouldn't have surprised me if she'd lifted that dead arm of hers and shaken me hard.

“‘That's the one I want,’ she said, ‘bring it here.’

“She said the last words slowly, indifferently, but the sweat was standing on her forehead, and it might have warned me—but didn't. Remember, miss, it had never crossed my mind there was poison in that bottle, or she might have ordered forever, and I wouldn't have brought it.

“But I lingered a bit. I scarcely knew how. There was something about her that frightened me—and well there might be, when there was but a slip between her and death, right out of everything she knew, miss, into something—that she didn't—and not a prayer on her lips.

“I went back and fetched the bottle—oh, miss! when I kneeled down beside you—if you'd only woke then! But you slept on and looked so white and weary my heart ached for you—'twas such a different face to the one you brought here first.

“I went back to her. When I was close, she said, ‘There's one more thing, Lydia, and you must do it. I want the desk; there's one letter in it I *must* read over, or I shan't sleep to-night.’

“‘But I can't, ma'am,’ I said quite worn out. ‘It's

a mercy I ain't caught as it is, and I should have to take two more journeys. You must wake her up if you like——'

"‘And tell her what a sneak you’ve been to her?’ she said to me in her cool way. ‘How she will love you! Go directly, she sleeps like a top.’

"Well, I went. I took out the desk, while my heart beat like mad, and I brought it to her. I found the letter she wanted, and, miss—if ever a gentleman loved a lady and knew how to put it into words, Mr. Norton loved you. I held the night-light close to the page—but she knew it all by heart, and then she said when I was going to put the letters back,

"‘Put them here beside me while you give me the draught.’

"I thought it was nonsense, for I was just mad to get away, but at last I lifted the coverlid and put the packet inside."

"What became of the desk?" I inquired.

"It was found after, I suppose, put on one side, the women thinking it was hers. I thought you would have been sure to see it, miss."

I shook my head. I had seen nothing—nothing but that dead face on the pillow when I went to her,

and the care-women had come in later to do all that was necessary.

“She lay still after that for about twenty seconds, and I thought I heard her mutter master’s name, then with something between a long sob and a shudder, she said,

“‘Give me the draught now.’

“‘Let me put it in a wineglass,’ I said.

“‘No,’ and she opened her mouth.

“I uncorked the bottle close to her face, and poured it down. I shall never forget her eyes, miss—Lydia covered her own—to my dying day, as I did it. She had barely swallowed the draught, and it seemed to me a very little one, when her face was convulsed with agony, and with a stifled shriek her eyes turned to stone—and she was dead.

“It all passed in an instant. The bottle slipped from my fingers, I was almost as still and frozen as she was, and I couldn’t call out any more than she could, for my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I was too dazed to think of anything but that ’twas my hand that killed her, and I wanted to get out of sight of what I’d done. I don’t know to this day how I got away—but somehow I did. I unlocked the folding doors, I stole upstairs and into bed with

Martha, and there I lay trembling till your bell pealed, and because I daren't stay behind, ran down with the rest. I hadn't thought of what I was going to do—I was stunned, and as things turned out there wasn't nothing to do—but hold my tongue. And I held it. But when I saw how 'twas going against you after the inquest, I thought it would be a good thing to make people suspect master—but 'twas no good—and you'd got that idea you'd done it in your sleep, and you wouldn't do a thing to help yourself. And all along I thought they'd never bring it home to you—and I saw how it had been a regular plan of *hers*, getting the letters and all, so as to be found when she was dead, I being her tool. But they 'victed you, miss—I was in court and heard it. And when I thought how but for that ne'er-do-well, my sister's husband, I'd never have been led into temptation, or laid the sin of murder on my soul, *two* murders, miss, reckoning yours, if you died—I nearly went mad. I was ill for days, and not able to come to you—but I'm here now, miss, to take your place."

"No," I cried, throwing both arms above my head, almost delirious with the joy of *life*, of the love beyond, "it was an accident—they cannot even

punish you, and oh ! thank God, Lydia, thank God ! ”
and I fell on my knees with prayers and tears.

The turnkey looked at his watch.

“Time’s up,” he said, as calmly as if he were stating a fact. “I suppose you’ll want to see the governor of the jail?”

“Yes. Good-night, miss. The night’s over for you, and the day’s breaking.”

CHAPTER XII.

“ And are ye come at last, and do I hold ye fast ?

I hae nae time to tell ; but sae lang’s I like mysel

Sae lang shall I love you.”

THE day might be breaking, but it had not broken yet.

Lydia Small’s confession was received with doubt, so violently had she showed as my partisan throughout the whole business, and I knew that many people thought it a put-up thing arranged between us two women.

We were examined separately and together, the bedroom was viewed, and the scrap of paper signed by Sabine Norton’s teeth was rigorously compared with her other signatures, with the strange result that the letters, however rudely scrawled, were found to be shaped precisely in her usual way. Apparently it is the spirit, not the flesh and bone that

guides the pen, or it was not probable that Lydia, who had never seen her mistress's handwriting, could have forged an imitation of it.

Then corroborative testimony came from Milly, the sister for whom Lydia had virtually sold her soul, and the poor woman's story was identical, even to the smallest detail, with the one Lydia had told me; and the man to whom the jewel had been sold also came forward to uphold the truth, which at last prevailed, and Lydia stood in my place, so that having been royally pardoned for a crime I did not commit, I found myself—free.

Free! And to go whither?

Into Hardress's arms, longingly held out towards me, while good men and women cried shame upon me, holding me, if blood-guiltless indeed, guilty of that which should make them shun me for evermore?

No. But I would not trust myself near him. . . . I had fought so long, and I was tired—dead tired, and so when the day of my release came, I sent him a false message that at a certain hour he was to come for me. . . . but long before the hour struck I had stolen away.

Will he find me? Shall we come together with-

out sin or shame, with tired hearts, out of which nor years nor fickleness nor grief have been able to stamp the living souls of one another?

To me, with ears long strained by listening, his eager footsteps seem to follow on the pulsing, passionate spring and soon I shall be overtaken.

THE END.

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Richardson

VENUS VICTRIX

A Study of a Woman

BY

HELEN MATHERS

AUTHOR OF

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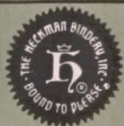


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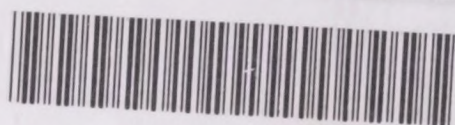


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